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Scully-Blaker, Rainforest

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Combatting Exhaustion and Reclaiming Leisure:
Radical Slowness and the (Re)Generative Potential of Play

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Informatics

by

Rainforest Scully-Blaker

Dissertation Committee:
Assistant Professor Aaron Trammell, Chair
Associate Professor Bonnie Ruberg
Professor Katie Salen Tekinbaş

2022

DEDICATION

For my Mother and Father,
to whom I owe the world for bringing me into it:
Though this page is theirs and theirs alone,
what I have learned from them is present in all those that follow,
and all those that have come before.

“...the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

- *Middlemarch*

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And to you, dear reader – thank you.

VITA

Rainforest Scully-Blaker

EDUCATION & WORK EXPERIENCE

- 1996 Pre-Kindergarten, Bancroft Elementary School, Montréal, QC, Canada.
- 2003 Elementary School, Elizabeth Ballantyne School, Montréal, QC, Canada.
- 2008 Secondary School, Royal West Academy, Montréal, QC, Canada.
- 2010 Diplôme d'études collégiales in Arts and Culture, Dawson College, Montréal, QC, Canada.
- 2014 Honours Bachelor of Arts in Western Society and Culture, Minor in Creative Writing, Concordia University, Montréal, QC, Canada. Thesis Title: Cracked Cauldrons and Philistinism in All Its Phases: Idées Reçues and Poshlost in *Madame Bovary* and *Lolita*.
- 2016 M.A. Media Studies, Concordia University, Montréal, QC, Canada. Thesis Title: Re-Curating the Accident: Speedrunning as Community and Practice.
- 2017-2021 Teaching Assistant, University of California, Irvine
- 2020 M.S. Informatics, University of California, Irvine.
- Spring 2021 Instructor of Record for ICS 62: *Game Technology and Interactive Media*, University of California, Irvine.
- Winter 2022 Instructor of Record for GDIM 25: *Game Design Fundamentals*, University of California, Irvine.
- 2022 Ph.D. in Informatics, University of California, Irvine. Dissertation Title: Radical Slowness and the Critical Potential of Play (you are here)

FIELD OF STUDY

That's quite a personal question, we've only just met.

PUBLICATIONS

Scully-Blaker, Rainforest. "Re-framing the Backlog: Radical Slowness and Patient Gaming" *Ecogames* (Exact title TBD). Eds. J. Raessens, L. op de Beke, G. Farca, and S. Werning. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, Forthcoming 2022.

Ruberg, Bonnie and Rainforest Scully-Blaker. "Making Players Care: The Ambivalent Cultural Politics of Care and Video Games." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 24, Issue 4, June 2021.

Scully-Blaker, Rainforest. "On Seeing and Being Seen: Perception and Visibility in Video Games." *Digital Culture and Society*, Vol. 5, Issue 2/2019, 2020.

Scully-Blaker, Rainforest. "Stasis and Stillness: Moments of inaction in Games." *Press Start*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2020.

Scully-Blaker, Rainforest. "Buying Time: Capitalist Temporalities in Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp." *Loading...* Vol. 12, No. 20, 2019.

Consalvo, Mia, Jason Begy, Sarah Christina Ganzon, and Rainforest Scully Blaker. "Tandem Play: Theorizing Sociality in Single Player Gameplay" *Video Games: A Medium That Demands Our Attention*. Ed. N. Bowman. New York: Routledge, 2018. 146-160.

Scully-Blaker, Rainforest. "The Speedrunning Museum of Accidents." *Kinephanos*, Special Issue August 2018.

Begy, Jason, M. Consalvo, R. Scully-Blaker, S. C. Ganzon. "Methodological Considerations in the Study of Tandem Play." *Loading...* Vol. 12, No 16, 2017.

Scully-Blaker, Rainforest. "*Since it is done neither for critical acclaim nor for financial gain, bathroom stall graffiti is the purest form of art.*" *Discuss*: 2015 [Sharpie on High Density Polyethylene]. Fiddler's Green Irish Pub (Men's Bathroom, First Stall), Montréal, Canada.

Scully-Blaker, Rainforest. "A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space With De Certeau and Virilio." *Game Studies* Vol. 14, No. 1, 2014.

HONOURS, SCHOLARSHIPS, &c

SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship (2020-2022)

FQRSC Doctoral Research Scholarship (2017-2019)

FQRSC Doctoral Research Scholarship (In name only) (2016)

ICA 2016 Conference Best Paper Prize

Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Master's Scholarship (2015-2016)

Concordia University Merit Scholarship (2014-2015)

Concordia Faculty of Arts and Science Scholar (2012-2013)

Concordia University Dean's List (2011, 2012, 2013)

Lois and Stan Tucker Scholarship (2012, 2013)

Concordia Undergraduate Student Research Award (2013)

Liberal Arts College Contribution to Student Life Award (2013)

Liberal Arts College In-Course Scholarship (2013)

Best Essay Prize for LBCL 392, History of Music (2012)

Liberal Arts College Entrance Scholarship (2011)

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Combatting Exhaustion and Reclaiming Leisure:
Radical Slowness and the (Re)Generative Potential of Play

by

Rainforest Scully-Blaker

Doctor of Philosophy in Informatics

University of California, Irvine, 2022

Assistant Professor Aaron Trammell, Chair

The neoliberal, capitalist logics that underpin our globalized world are failing. To wake up each day is to be reacquainted with the sense that we are on the verge of social, political, economic, and ecological collapse. It is so clear to so many who are impacted by this exhausting status quo that something must be done, but even collective desires to steer away from unfettered profit and growth are stymied by the fatigue of everyday life. We want change, but we are tired... This dissertation is concerned with the pursuit of meaningful, systemic change and it approaches the problem through an investigation of the intersectional politics of leisure and exhaustion in both video games and culture at large. From my investigations into the designs and discourses surrounding play, slowness, and rest, I argue that, far from offering a break from the fatigue of our daily work, video games are often designed in ways that uphold neoliberal values of productivity and self-management. Through a combination of critical theory, discourse analysis, and game analysis, I examine how our individualistic, “grind culture” perpetuates the exhaustion of bodies (both the extraction of people-as-resource for productive ends and the cultivation of

fatigue to hamper dissent) even when we are supposedly “at rest.” I draw parallels between the rule-based systems of games and the real-world crises of labour and wealth disparity and ask whether there is a way to work both on and at leisure so that it operates against exhaustion and against the logics of neoliberal, late capitalism. To answer this, I analyze case studies of video games and play practices which I see as potentially operating against exhaustion. I conclude by arguing that a willful slowing of our relation to play and media consumption can produce a generative (and regenerative) suspension of neoliberal, capitalist logics that carves out time and space for imagining and indeed enacting more socially just alternatives to the status quo.

Introduction

Every End has a Beginning

This dissertation is about a number of things – slowness in video games, the contemporary relation between labour and leisure, and the critical potential of play, to name a few – but *exhaustion* is at the heart of it all. As I say throughout this document, my goal is to find ways of carving out the time and space for imagining and enacting meaningful change in a system that leaves so many by the wayside. To help explain what I mean, I would like to begin with some of my own history, not to weigh my version of precarity against those of others or to evoke pity, but because my personal experiences up to this point are part of the backdrop against which this dissertation was written.

I was born in Montreal, Canada to two loving parents who were both working class, first-generation university students. It was in such institutions of higher learning that they developed their political sensibilities through exposure to collective organizing and unions. By the time they met and decided they wanted to raise a child, then, they already shared a number of values that would translate into my upbringing. Chief among these was that, especially for our family, which had no savings or connections, an education was the path towards future stability, which likely offers a partial explanation for why I am writing a dissertation to begin with.

Since most at-home activities were therefore chosen for their educational value, my parents and I joke that I do research on games now because combining that pastime with school was the only way I could ever get them to let me play them.¹

In the years leading up to having me, my parents had worked exceedingly hard in an era when that was difficult, but also paid off, enabling them to own a home in the lower income, predominantly French Plateau Mont-Royal. In the hopes of enrolling me in the what was thought to

¹ Although, I would be permitted to play an hour or two of games on weekends as long as I did a corresponding amount of reading. Even here I tried to game the system by turning on closed captioning while I watched TV.

be the best English-speaking public school in the city, my parents sold their home and moved to the more middle-class, anglophone Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. It was not what one would call a buyer's market at the time, so they opted to rent for a year, get settled, and buy once they knew the lay of the land. This decision, like many of its scale, had consequences.

My parents were not to know that they had sold their house just before and had planned to buy just after the rise of what is now called the Canadian property bubble, a steady rise in the cost of housing throughout the country that has continued, effectively unabated, to this day. Most recently, despite Montreal having relatively strong tenant protections, practices such as renovictions and ballooning rental fees between tenants² have created a drastic shortage of affordable housing (Laframboise, 2022). In the year that we moved, the bump was large enough that my parents entered the housing market only to immediately be priced out of it.

As a result, our one-year lease was renewed until it became nine years of paying rent, which only ended as a result of our space being repossessed by the landlord. This cycle of leases and repossessions would continue through my youth and into my adulthood and persists to this day. Since moving away to do this PhD in California, about as many of my trips home have been to help them move as have been for pleasure. And even though the ink has long since dried on their most recent lease, after so many years of this cycle, the threat of repossession still hangs ever overhead.³ I have seen first-hand how renting is a broken arrangement - a slow, exhausting process of packing, unpacking, and paying more money for less space. But like many my age, I cannot be sure that mortgage payments would be any more affordable.

In many ways, I have been very lucky. My education remained a priority throughout my upbringing. When the time came, we could afford for me to attend a university in Montreal because

² A process made easier to exploit given that the city has four universities with many moving to and away from the city each academic year. Still, this is far from the only cause of rising rents.

³ All of this occurs despite the fact that Quebec's tenancy laws are some of the most protective of renters in the country. There are only three legal reasons that one can be repossessed by a landlord (assuming one pays rent and breaks no other laws) and my family has been evicted for each of them at least once.

my mother now worked there and so my tuition would be waived, but anything else, including this PhD, was made possible through scholarships which could be earned in part because I had the space and time to work for them. While my parents found the words to express their class consciousness through collective organizing, my political sensibility has grown out of these movements from house to house while also developing a clearer sense of the privileges and opportunities that I *am* afforded due systemic biases. Whenever I feel the weight of worrying whether this degree will lead to a job, I wonder if it is just the stress of the PhD, or whether the fatigue is its own sort of generational wealth. And I wonder how so many others in similar, let alone worse, situations must feel.

Indeed, such exhaustion is not a unique experience, but it is one from which I write, and I would be remiss if I left that submerged in an authorial voice that glosses and generalizes. Useful too are the ways that this part of my past and present connects to the larger mosaic of activity and exhaustion under neoliberal, late capitalism, which I see as the fulcrum on which much of the analysis to come rests. I see this introduction, then, as a means of wading into these murky waters before fully immersing ourselves in my theoretical framework in Chapter 1 and beyond. Let us continue adding to the mosaic before taking a step back and talking about what it means.

Piecing Things Together

I see this dissertation as a multifaceted account of an exhausting state of living and an attempt on my part to find ways of navigating and ultimately dismantling that cycle. Even as I attend to the larger architectures of power and hegemony that have been with us in some shape or form since time immemorial, the discussion will be situated in literatures of those who are left at the margins of the present system according to intersectional vectors of privilege and oppression. In terms of ways that my own experiences arrive on the page, this dissertation was written during a particular time (and in several different places) amidst cultural phenomena including Black and Indigenous-led social movements, the COVID-19 pandemic and the troublingly unhindered rise of

fascism in the West (if indeed it ever left). While proper summation of any of these would require the care and precision only possible in works unto themselves, I note here that they necessarily figure into my thoughts and my experiences while writing this dissertation, particularly in my sense of what I at various points call hegemony, the dominant, or, most often, *the status quo*.

The Status Quo

The neoliberal, capitalist logics that underpin our globalized world are failing. In North America, tensions are mounting between a so-called labour shortage and the demand for a living wage (Buffam 2021). Some seem surprised to find that businesses which pay their workers adequately also experience less shortages (Dean, 2022). Down the road from my campus in Irvine, California, the state government litigates the Activision-Blizzard game studio for its deplorable labour conditions and a corporate culture rife with discrimination and sexual harassment (Fenlon, 2021) while local rideshare workers continue to struggle for rights (Eidelson, 2021). Blizzard's CEO stands to receive 400 million dollars from a Microsoft buyout as part of the biggest deal in industry history and yet another push towards monopolistic consolidation (Tan, 2022). Such large sums of money being abstracted into sentences on a page serve as yet another exhausting reminder that wealth disparity is perpetually on the rise (Bardeesy, 2021). In Canada, the housing shortage is exacerbated by gig platforms like AirBnB (Bickis, 2019) such that tens of thousands of homes serve to make owners wealthier rather than providing anyone with permanent shelter (Cardoso and Lundy, 2019). About half of Canadians my age feel that owning a home is beyond their reach (Khan, 2020).

As Chang helpfully reminds us, “economic and environmental concerns are always intertwined” (2019, p. 147). This claim is perhaps best emblemized by the viral photo of a GrubHub employee that continued working during a massive flood in New York City (See Fig. 1) (O'Neill, 2021), itself an icon of the worsening threat of global warming (Kaplan and Ba Tran, 2021). For those living through this period defined by exhaustion and helplessness, it is not all that

surprising to encounter articles with titles such as “Nearly half of young people worldwide say climate change anxiety is affecting their daily life” (McKeever, 2021), or the even more blunt, “56 Percent of Young People Think Humanity Is Doomed” (Galer, 2021).



Fig. 1 – A GrubHub employee contends with financial and ecological precarity in New York City.

Amidst such overarching threats, minoritized populations continue to fight for recognition and survival. In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recently appealed a court order to pay billions of dollars in restitution to Indigenous children who were willfully denied welfare (Cecco, 2021). Meanwhile, he expressed regrets about the “discovery” (though their existence was undeniably known) of the remains of over one thousand Indigenous children who had lost their lives at mandatory, state-run boarding schools (Weisberger, 2021). Back in America, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, efforts have been made to ban or restrict what is erroneously called critical race theory from being taught in schools (Stout and Wilburn, 2022), which includes forbidding any account of uncomfortable historical facts, including America’s dealings in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. At the same time, in the nation’s capital, three Republican representatives made headlines for opposing a bill that would make lynching a federal hate crime (Metzger, 2022). Down the way in Texas, the parents of transgender children are subject to investigations related to supposed child abuse for allowing their loved ones access to gender-affirming medical care (Yurcaba, 2022) and several states, most recently Oklahoma, have outlawed abortions (Luthrea, 2022).

Disparate though these events may seem, they are all symptoms of the same socioeconomic trends, clear indicators of who and what is expendable to hegemony, which forms of labour are devalued or obscured, and the lengths to which many in a profit-driven market will go to adapt to threats of extinction rather than combatting them. It is so clear to so many who are impacted by any of these stories that *something* must be done, but the list of those with the energy to put up the required resistance is short. We want change, but we are tired.

Exhaustion and Radical Slowness

To me, this rosy summation of everyday life recalls Berlant's concept of *slow death*, which she defines as "the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (2011, p. 95). Oppression felt along any number of intersectional lines is both an assault on individuals themselves, but also on their *energy*. When Chang, in speaking of environmental collapse, speaks of "the disquieting sense that the problem is beyond measurement and therefore redress," she could just as easily be speaking of any unjust exercise of institutional power (2019, p. 150). Whether one chooses to actively stand against such oppressive norms or simply has to exist in opposition to them because of their identity, Ahmed reminds us that "mere persistence can be an act of disobedience," but that such disobedience comes at a cost (Ahmed, 2014, para. 37). In Chapter 1, I put forth the term *zugzwang*, a term from chess which refers to a position in which every possible move puts one at a disadvantage, to characterize this state of perpetual exhaustion and expenditure.

I am of the mind that every problem has a resolution, if not a solution. In the context of slow death and *zugzwang*, Berlant's elegantly phrased tactic of "using the time [we] do not have" is part of what inspires the critical thrust of this work (p. 119). In short, I am both unwilling and unable to dispense with the possibility that a better world is possible.

In want of time we do not have, I look to Keeling's critical and temporal occupation of "'as if'" (2019, p. 14). To act 'as-if' meaningful change can be attained is to "[hold] in reserve a radical

imagination that approaches the limits of knowledge, not as a problem to be overcome, but as the condition of possibility” (p. 14). I similarly see this dissertation as an exercise in what Odell calls *manifest dismantling*, “a form of purposiveness bound up with remediation,” (2019, p. 192). These are the hopes behind my concept of *radical slowness*, what I define as a deliberate failure to ‘keep up’ with the ever-accelerating rhythm of capitalist society as a political act. Throughout this document, I argue that this willful deceleration is a *reclamation*, here of when and why we are at rest, and a *deconstruction* of the classed division between taking one’s time and having one’s time taken. However, this term only accounts for one half of the title of this dissertation.

Critique and Criticality

Given that this work is also interested in the critical potential of play, it behooves me to explain what I mean by critique. Indeed, the definition of the term is often treated as self-evident despite it being deployed in a number of contexts both inside and outside academia. The popular definition of being critical of something, for instance, usually implies disapproval. In a more academic context, critique is not so much an opinion on something as a philosophy through which to ‘read’ culture and its facets in various ways, but its role is still arguably “to make reality unacceptable” (Boltanski, 2011, p. 5). Here I also think of Horkheimer’s definition of critical theory as a way of looking at the world that “is suspicious of the very categories of better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable” (1972, p. 207). While these definitions are certainly in play in this dissertation, there is still more behind what I mean by criticality.

Consider Dunne and Raby’s understanding of critical design, whereby critique can equally be “a turning away from what exists, a longing, wishful thinking, a desire, and even a dream” (2013, p. 34-35). Such a characterization of critique recalls works on queer futurity and queer utopia, particularly Muñoz’ assertion that “from a shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality” (2009, p. 189). Critique, then, can be a positive force – rather than simply stating that something could be better, one can imply a desire for improvement by theorizing or even

embodying alternatives. Critique can *make* something, it can *be* something. When I speak of the critical potential of play, then, my hope is ultimately that it can be a force of *(re)generation* in the sense that it restores our energy while also enabling us to create new ways of being that depart from the exhausting status quo.

Given my interest in where and how we choose to expend our energy, though, I believe that it is important to acknowledge the demands placed by critique on the individual. While I will discuss her work more extensively in Chapter 3, here I take inspiration from Arendt's sense of labour as an endlessly necessary and necessarily endless form of maintenance upon which "life itself depends" (1958, p. 87). As Boltanski suggests, "critique only becomes meaningful with respect to the order that it puts in crisis" and "the systems which ensure [...] the preservation of an order only become fully meaningful when one realizes that they are based on the constant threat [...] represented by the possibility of critique" (2011, p. 57). Critique, then, must be constant or else its impact falls away.

To me, this evokes the democratic⁴ ideal of "agonism" as it is taken up by Phillips (and others⁵) "in which adversaries compete on a field of mutual respect and interdependence" and in which interlocutors are "honest about the incommensurable differences between various factions and identities [but] nevertheless recognize the value in multiple perspectives" (2020, p. 174). Whereas the present sociopolitical system demands flexibility and patience from those with the least power, in an agonistic sphere, it is the policies themselves which can never truly be set in stone.⁶

⁴ I note here that, although "democratic" this is the best word for the context, I tend to be wary of the word "democracy" for the huge range of things to which it has been applied.

⁵ I am thinking particularly of DiSalvo 2012, although I am much more critical of his work with the term for reasons that relate to my discussion of top-down design theory in Chapter 4.

⁶ This will be discussed more in Chapter 3, but I do not believe that critique or indeed any labour is inherently exhausting, it is rather the way our labour has been organized under neoliberal capitalism which leaves us too tired to effect meaningful change. Under agonism, the work of critique does of course require energy, but if the system is not organized in a way that aims to exhaust us and maintain a status quo, then such expenditures of energy do not lead to *exhaustion* as I frame it here.

In sum, my sense of critique can therefore be considered as *a process without apparent end in which one responds to a particular reality (what it is doing or not doing) in a way that destabilizes that reality while potentially imagining or enacting an alternative to that reality*. Though this is arguably implicit in the definition itself, I note that such a process need not consist of a piece of writing. Indeed, even critical theorists like Hardt and Negri note that “a political alternative to Empire” will never “arise from a theoretical articulation” alone – “It will only arise in practice” (2000, p. 206). In many ways this is a characteristic of critique that is already well-understood across many disciplines, however my work draws most heavily from literary and communication studies’ discussions of media consumption.

Consuming Critically

While the state of being exhausted doubtless limits one’s ability and desire to turn their leisurely consumption of media into a critical exercise, this does not equate to our accepting all messages at face value. One of the more prominent writers who theorizes the ways people make sense of the world around them is Stuart Hall, specifically his encoding/decoding model and its accompanying claim that “no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated” (1992, p. 508). His work is useful here for understanding the sort of bottom-up model of critique I endorse in this dissertation and will also prove useful when discussing the shortcomings of design theory in Chapter 4. Despite the best efforts of a given broadcasting structure to package (encode) and circulate a specific message, it is the “set of decoded meanings which ‘have an effect’, influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade” (p. 509). Thus, it is not the author who becomes the final arbiter of meaning, but rather the reader.⁷

⁷ Even so, he readily admits that “certain codes may [...] be so widely distributed [...] that they appear not to be constructed [...] but to be ‘naturally’ given” (Hall, 1992, p. 511). Indeed, I think that Hall’s notion of “preferred readings” which become “institutionalized” ties specifically to Horkheimer and Adorno’s Enlightenment as something that is ‘decided from the start’ (p. 513; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944). Still, Hall’s distinction between author, the moment of encoding, and reader, the moment of decoding, is an important departure from the helpless, uncritical spectator.

This is echoed by De Certeau's notion of "reading as poaching" (1980, p. 165). In opposition to the claim that media consumption is "essentially passive," De Certeau writes that "we may be able to discover creative activity where it has been denied that any exists and to relativize the exorbitant claim that *a certain kind* of production [...] can set out to produce history by 'informing'; the whole of a country" (p. 167).⁸ This, in turn, ties to the author's larger interest in "making do" which is shorthand for the various 'tricks' that individuals use to navigate systems larger than themselves (p. 29).⁹ Here again, we have someone who suggests that to discount the agency and the interpretive faculties of a consumer is to oversimplify and overstate the potency of media. While De Certeau and Hall both respect the power inherent in being able to produce and circulate ideas on a massive scale, they are resolved that the ultimate fate of that message lies with the receivers.

We can see this expressed again in Barthes' "Death of the Author" in which he writes that "To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification" (1967, p. 5). Like critique itself, the notion that a given text can be finished and can have a set impact is to pin the work in place and time in a way that does not reflect how these objects are experienced in practice. Rather, it is as Barthes says that "a text consists of multiple writings" (p. 5). It is the *reader* who creates 'meaning' (which itself consists of many meanings). For Barthes, "the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination" (p. 6). And although Keeling's temporality of 'as-if' compels me to frame any destination as a striving-towards rather than a stopping point, it is in this process of reading and refining that I situate a critical, transformative potential.

⁸ As I will discuss in Chapter 4, this "exorbitant claim" pervades into game design theory in notable ways.

⁹ While I am doubtless interested in the ways that individuals navigate oppressive systems, I do note that De Certeau's understanding of how this works in practice seems a bit utopic. While I initially arrived at this skepticism through comparing De Certeau and Foucault's respective senses of power (the former seeing it as something anyone can seize and the other seeing it as a set of relations which one cannot hold or transcend), I have since softened to De Certeau's less fatalistic understanding of the term. Even so, I do not think that making do is an effective way of bringing forth change, rather I see it only as serving to keep one's head above water.

While all of these authors necessarily situate their theory in the media texts of their time, I see no reason why these ideas cannot be applied to the video game as well. Such compatibility is far from my only reason for centering this dissertation around these playable media objects, however.

Games and Play

Given how many weapons are at one's disposal when attempting to resist systems larger than ourselves, one's choice of tactic always bears some unpacking. Beyond my personal history as an avid player of games, there are a number of reasons that I have chosen them as my object of inquiry here. First, video games are media objects that are made and then consumed by people – that is, *they both inform and are informed by culture*. As Murray and other scholars¹⁰ have noted, games “powerfully mirror, but also engender, a certain sense of how the world is” (2017, p. 2). This statement arguably only becomes truer over time as the industry continues to grow, with the COVID-19 pandemic causing the market to surge to about \$180 billion¹¹ as more and more people purchase and play games.

In my research, I align myself with Murray and those authors who endeavour to shed light on the various ways that games, these “powerful invocations of the lived world in playable form,” contain “the core fears, fantasies, hopes, and anxieties of a given culture in a specific cultural context” (p. 2). With this in mind, I believe it is helpful to treat the design of these objects and their consumption by players, spectators, fans, etc. as two distinct, yet equally important, parts of the same question.¹²

While I will discuss game design more deeply in later chapters, Murray and others' framing of video games as containers of cultural meaning would seem to correspond with the worst fears of critical theorists like Horkheimer and Adorno, namely that “no independent thinking must be

¹⁰ The relations of games and/as culture are discussed from numerous perspectives including Chess (2017), Crogan (2011), Paul (2018), and Anable (2018), among others.

¹¹ A figure which outstrips film and North American sports combined (Witowski, 2021)

¹² For examples of authors who dismantle the false dichotomy between games and play in greater detail, see Voorhees (2013), Kocurek (2018), and Marcotte (2018).

expected from the audience” as the same messages get dispensed and circulated again and again (1944, p. 137). Instead, the consumption of entertainment media under Enlightenment, a “totalitarian” model in which “the process is always decided from the start” produces “misery” in the spectator (p. 24, 38). Returning to Hall, it therefore becomes important to attend to those “preferred readings” which become “institutionalized” and therefore more complicated and more costly to critique (1992, p. 96). Thus, video games are important cultural objects for the way that they allow us to analyze how and where some messages flow and how and where others do not.

However, to simply leave it at this often risks robbing the player of any agency or even independent thought. As outlined above, in opposition to the idea that all consumption is thoughtless, I instead seek to account for the “advances and retreats, tactics and games played with the text,” actions which I believe are particularly pronounced in virtual worlds. (De Certeau, 1980, p. 175). No matter how great a weight the dominant places on which stories get told and which do not within a given culture, there are those who work (or play) at carving out alternate narratives, each according to their energy. A video game is an object whose creation and consumption allow us to understand more about culture at large.

A second reason for centering games stems from Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter’s assertion that “virtual games are exemplary media of empire,” here another word for hegemony or what we called the status quo (2009, p. xxix). From the video game’s origin in the “military-industrial complex”¹³ to the fact that “game making blurs the lines between work and play [...] in a way that typifies the boundless exercise of biopower,” Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter offer multiple arguments in *Games of Empire* (2009) to argue for this claim (p.xxix). I particularly note how the authors frame game culture’s constant fluctuation between “creative dissidence and profitable compliance,” which echoes the constant struggle between institutions and those who live under them (p. 190). This neatly ties work on games and/as culture together with work on power,

¹³ See Crogan (2011)

dominance, and oppression. The authors helpfully consider games not just as objects that may be in the hands of designers and players, but, as tools which can do ideological and biopolitical *work* in service of maintaining or upending the status quo.

These first two reasons for studying games inform a third: as designed worlds which are then taken up by independent actors, video games are an ideal site for understanding how we variously inhabit systems larger than ourselves. This is best illustrated by Wark's *Gamer Theory*, a text which, despite its age has seen relatively little discussion within game studies despite its important revisions to our preconceived notions of play or game.

Among the primordial play and games theorists such as Huizinga, play is defined as a “free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life” which “is connected to no material interest” and which “proceeds [...] according to fixed rules” (2014, p. 13). Caillois amends this definition to include “games of chance played for money” since “in certain of its manifestations, play is designed to be extremely lucrative or ruinous” (2001, p. 5). It is only those for whom games are a means of earning a living – “the professionals” – who push the drive for financial gain too far and are therefore no longer “players but workers” (p. 6). And while this critique of Huizinga is well-warranted, Caillois still hangs on to both the notion that play must be a voluntary activity and that exists apart from ‘ordinary’ life.¹⁴

These early ways of framing the space of games and the space of “real life” as separate, or perhaps somewhat overlapping spheres (the Magic Circle or perhaps the Magic Venn Diagram?) have fallen out of fashion in recent years, but before many better-known critiques of these ideas emerged, Wark was already writing that “Games are no longer a pastime, outside or alongside of

¹⁴ I want to briefly touch on the notion of the corruption of games, whereby “what used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession” (Caillois, 2001, p. 44). While I agree with Caillois’ definition as-written, I question the efficacy of suggesting that *any* play is somehow entirely outside of this definition. In particular, I wonder what is gained by preserving some Platonic ideal of play in this way? Or, approaching the problem from the standpoint of critical theory, is this definition truly serviceable if it fails to account for who gets to play at what games and when?

life. They are now the very form of life and death and time itself” (2007, [6]¹⁵). In so doing, she moves beyond the popular conception of games as individually defined ‘things’ in the world, instead arguing that all of society’s processes and structures are organized around the *logic* of games.¹⁶

She uses the term “gamespace” to describe “this atopian arena” that has no outside (Wark, 2007, [1]). The only end to the game comes when “you are either dead, or defeated, or at best out of quarters,” which I read as the depletion of life, energy, and capital, respectively ([6]). Rather than suggesting that games are simply an exemplary media of empire, Wark takes the position (which I adopt here as well) that they are *the* exemplary (perhaps even the *foundational*) media of empire and that the study of games as cultural objects allows us to make inroads to understanding the instrumental, game-like logic that operates at a global scale.

In sum, video games are objects which inform and are informed by culture to the extent that they are in fact exemplary media for understanding empire precisely because the organizational logic of game is what makes up those systems larger than ourselves which we navigate on a daily basis. As I will discuss in Chapter 1, this framework is aligned with a thread in critical game studies which re-evaluates even our taken-for-granted senses of play and game, making the case that the former is not always voluntary or that the latter is not always fun. I align myself with this orientation to game studies to insist on the inherent criticality of the often-depoliticized space of play while also contributing to existing discourses around oppression and resistance. Following Wark, games and what I have taken to calling the critical potential of play are central to work of imagining and enacting alternative ways of being which refuse a slow death and embrace a collective flourishing.

¹⁵ Wark uses [bracketed] aphorism numbers instead of page or paragraph numbers, hence the unusual citation style.

¹⁶ To torture the metaphor a bit further, it turns out that the “Magic Venn Diagram” of Games and Real Life *is* actually a circle here, however, I would argue that it is anything but magic.

Changing the Game

While I will be looking at some of the various ways that players can (and do) undermine the games they play in the chapters to come, that such disruption is possible at all is important to establish from the outset. This is because I see this dissertation as an argument precisely for why (and the beginnings of how) we should change the institutional ‘games’ of everyday life in which we all participate to survive. When discussing *why* changing these systems matters, both for game design and perhaps something greater, I am most struck by the writing of Bernie de Koven, for whom “the point of changing a game is so that we can all play it well together” (2013, p. 46). He writes, “there are times – more times than one would think – when it is remarkably useful to the community as a whole and to the players in particular to have the power to change some of the rules” (p. 45). Throughout his writing, de Koven is clear that “it’s not the game that’s sacred, it’s the people who are playing” (p. 44).¹⁷ And while he does not make Wark’s explicit leap between the design of games and the designs of other rule-based systems, it is clear that this is on the author’s mind.

In the final sentences of his analysis of the well-played game, de Koven speculates that “If we can create even larger games that we can all play together – all of us – then there will be no separation between us and others, no *we* and *they* [...] if we can find out how to do that, then we might be able to raise the stakes infinitely” (p. 143). In a very real sense, this idealistic vision of an alternative way of being is at the core of this dissertation. While the proceeding pages may not be so inclined to wax poetic on the beauty and freedom of play (at least, such as it is/has been), one way of sating my desire to inhabit the hopefulness of Keeling’s ‘as if’ is to imagine alternative ways of being that are enabled by re-framing our relationships with games and with play. If we are to

¹⁷ I do not wish this to be taken as my suggesting that game design otherwise cares very little about the player, but given all I’ve said so far about the various ways that design and designers often operate, I do not think it is far-fetched to suggest most major studios do not center the sacredness of the player as much as de Koven advocates for here.

embark on this journey of critical striving, of raising the stakes indefinitely (or at least giving them a push in the right direction), then we will need a roadmap.

Outline of the Present Work

While this introduction has begun the process, *Chapter 1* will serve to fully articulate my statement of the problem which I am hoping to address. I will begin with a discussion of *zugzwang*, which I see as an effective model and metaphor for how *exhaustion* takes hold and persists under neoliberal capitalism. Given its place at the beginning of the analysis, this will also be the chapter in which I lay out my definitions of central terms like play and game, as well as a space to revisit the critical potential of play through the specific lens of labour and leisure. Finally, this will also be the chapter in which I introduce the concept of radical slowness, which I see as a possible solution to the problem of *zugzwang*. Doing so will also require defining several queer theory concepts, including queer failure, chrononormativity, and radical softness.

Next, given that I am attempting to both understand and identify slowness in games and that I wish to make claims about the critical potential of play, it is necessary that this work look to what players are *actually* saying and *actually* doing.¹⁸ *Chapter 2* therefore presents the results of my investigations into several discourses of slowness that I encountered across Reddit, Twitter, and other online spaces. In broad strokes, this chapter shows the various ways that the critical, (re)generative potential of slow play is dampened by those neoliberal, capitalist logics which frame video games as an exchange of money and time for leisure.

A significant portion of the chapter is devoted to my study of /r/patientgamers, a community of players who wait to play video games until well after their initial release. To best understand the ways that radical slowness might relate to patientgamer discourse, I employed

¹⁸ In this sense, I align myself with the projects of scholars like Kishonna Gray, whose work moves beyond a simple “deficit model” of power and marginalization which seldom accounts for how individuals “make sense of their intersecting identities in the midst of oppression, sustaining their communities” (Gray, 2020, p. 170). Oppression and resistance are two sides of the same coin and are therefore best discussed in tandem.

Foucauldian discourse analysis to “study forms of interaction, meaning making, and cultural production” on the subreddit (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 119). Rose (2001) identifies “two somewhat different methodological emphases” (p. 140). The first focuses on discourse “as articulated through various kinds of visual images and verbal texts” while the second pays more attention to “the practices of institutions [...] issues of power, regimes of truth, institutions and technologies” (p. 140). In this chapter, I frame Rose’s *types* of discourse analysis rather as *steps* in a larger process.

I began by conducting a general survey of the most popular posts, then sought out threads that used specific terms like ‘slowness’ or ‘slow play’ to begin approximating a ‘patientgaming philosophy’. From this initial set of searches, an unexpected pattern began to emerge: while many posts discussed individual games that had released in years prior, numerous others detailed how many players tried, and often failed, to slow down their lives in restful ways through their play. This led to my instead looking more closely at the patientgamers’ apparent impulse to treat their leisure time as work as well as a relationship between what I eventually came to call *comfort, nostalgia, and the backlog*.¹⁹ I then read these conversations against the larger analytic lens of my project with particular attention paid to “how hegemony is enacted and consolidated through discourse” in these online spaces (Trattner, 2017, p. 18). When presented as a cycle, these concepts allow me to make claims about what I call the transactional nature of play and the critical potential of the patientgamers’ slowing of their relationship to leisure time. I ultimately conclude that although slowness is not an inherently emancipatory concept, there is nonetheless a critical potential contained in the patientgamer ethos.

If Chapter 2 serves to present how slowness is already framed and potential inroads for how we may yet frame it, then the role of Chapter 3 is to do the same for the video game object. Like Chapter 2, this chapter also demonstrates why such work is so difficult. To do so, I unpack the fraught relationship between work and play in the contemporary moment. I begin by presenting my

¹⁹ I estimate that I read through 50-60 threads throughout this process.

sense of the relationship between labour, leisure, and exhaustion. In so doing I also introduce boredom as a concept which I suggest speaks to the specific ways leisure time drains our energy just as readily as labour. With that established, I then embark on a methodological approach that will be replicated in both Chapters 4 and 5 – the use of game analysis to discuss several case studies of specific games and moments of play.

To the best of my knowledge, the exact limits and rules of engagement for the qualitative analysis of video games differ depending on who you ask. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have endeavoured, like Sorraya Murray, to adopt an approach to game analysis that aims at “assembling a flexible set of tools and methodologies to meet the fluid, conflictual and transdisciplinary nature of this object of study” (2017, p. 26). Indeed, when I sat down to write Chapter 3, I was struck by how intuitive my choice of method seemed and yet how difficult it was to find a tidy way of describing it in the literature.²⁰ Rather than tracing any one methodological lineage, then, I have found it more helpful to outline my approach in plainer terms.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I engage in a close reading of video games that approaches them from several distinct perspectives which will be engaged simultaneously:

- (i) I will be examining each game as a *designed object*, that is to say a thing that was *made* by a person or group of people for a *purpose*.
- (ii) I will be examining each game as a *text*, that is to say a rules-driven narrative which has underlying themes and assumptions.
- (iii) I will be examining each game as a *cultural object*, that is to say something that was made within a specific context and which is informed by the political and ideological assumptions of its makers and of that context.
- (iv) I will be examining each game as something that is *played*, that is to say a piece of media whose reception and use are just as important as its formal elements, if not more so. To this end, I will also only discuss games which I have personally played for a dedicated period of time (to completion, where there is a clear end-state and to the point that I have seen most of the major mechanics and events otherwise).

²⁰ I have found that many authors who are clearly applying this method make no effort to qualify it, instead relying on the intuitiveness of describing and then interpreting games both as they are designed and as they are played.

As my reader has likely noted, the exact demarcation between each of these perspectives is often tentative at best. It is perhaps no accident that many game studies works which claim to do close readings²¹, textual analysis²², content analysis²³, game analysis²⁴, and so on, nonetheless bear many methodological resemblances to one another. Even so, I do not think that any one of these approaches adequately accounts for all of the others in such a way that they may be deemed unnecessary.²⁵

Through this amalgamation of analytic lenses, I discuss six games which I believe to be exemplary of the tensions that exist between labour and leisure in video game design. Based on certain family resemblances between the different titles, I divide them into three pairs and each pair is then analyzed in service of describing a larger concept. I begin with *Desert Bus* (Imagineering, n.d.) and *American Truck Simulator* (SCS Software, 2016), two games about long-haul drives from place to place as a way to discuss gamification and its underexplored counterpart, workification. Then, I analyze *Coffee Talk* (Fahmi 2020) and *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013), two games about serving a wider public (albeit in very different ways) as a means of discussing care work and control.²⁶ Finally, I discuss *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) and *Stardew Valley* (Barone, 2016) as wholesome, comfortable games which both gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic as marquee cases for the analysis of flow as a tool for political stasis.

Having fully articulated my sense of zugzwang and exhaustion through Chapters 1, 2, and 3, Chapter 4 begins the work of finding solutions by discussing several case studies of games which would seem to embrace a radically slow ethos *by design*. This premise presents us with a problem,

²¹ See Murray, 2017

²² See Carr, 2017

²³ See Malliet, 2007

²⁴ See Fernández-Vara, 2019

²⁵ Given game studies' storied history of decrying various methods and approaches to doing games research (particularly those adopted by non-white, non-male, non-straight scholars who adopt a critical feminist lens), I am loath to single out or dispense with any method that can help uncover the answers I seek. Similarly, I do not wish to suggest that I am creating anything new. The field's history of scholarly gatekeeping is well documented by Phillips (2020), Vossen (2018), and Murray (2005), among many others.

²⁶ Here particularly related to Deleuze's sense of the control society (1992).

however, as there are many facets of design theory which hinder my willingness to extoll it as a tool for revolution. As such, I begin by tackling what I call the *problem of design*, or the simultaneous necessity and undesirability that most design theory centers the designer as the sole guarantor of meaning within the system of a game. As we have already seen, I am deeply invested in the ways that actors subvert systems larger than themselves, but the very nature of design literature disincentivizes it from meaningfully engaging with such practices. As such, what we might call *anti-hegemonic designers* must walk a fine line lest they undercut their own efforts.

To qualify this stance, I pivot to discussing several case studies. I present four different games as two sets of pairs. First, I discuss *Kind Words* (Scott, 2019) and *The Truly Terrific Travelling Troubleshooter* (Squinkifer and Marcotte, 2017) as two examples of games which seek to produce systems for doing care work while taking steps to acknowledge that care *is* work (with varying levels of success). These games also serve as a jumping-off point to return to queer failure as a means to introduce the concept of the glitch. Next, I discuss *A Mortician's Tale* (Laundry Bear Games, 2017) and *Walden: a game* (Fullerton, 2017) as two games which center larger questions about the purpose of life and the nature of death under capitalism (again, with varying levels of success). I then conclude by briefly describing other games and even models of game development which I see as doing meaningful work to re-write the harmful and exploitative logics of game industry labour. While none of the games examined in this chapter are guaranteed to foster (re)generative play, I nonetheless argue for the overall importance of designing towards such an ideal as an ongoing, critical process.

Finally, Chapter 5 deals with radical slowness and the critical, (re)generative potential of play head-on. I use everything that has preceded this chapter to outline some characteristics of what a radically slow praxis might look like. Like Chapters 3 and 4 before it, this discussion also involves the use of case studies, albeit specific episodes of *gameplay* rather than games. I begin by presenting Suits' (2014) taxonomy of players, triflers, cheaters, and spoilsports as a way of

accounting for how we may variously behave in rule systems larger than ourselves. After briefly discussing each with specific reference to what Suits calls the *institutions* and *claims* of a game, I argue that it is the *trifler*, the respecter of rules but not goals, who is uniquely poised to make critical interventions in a system that may lead to positive change. I then connect the figure of the trifler to the concept of glitch as well. From this framework, I move to my case studies, of which there are three which are analyzed individually.

First, I engage with Straznickas' (2020) autoethnographic work on her time playing *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo, 2012) and the role it played in her learning to manage a then-undiagnosed chronic pain condition. While nowhere in her description of her play does she show signs of trifling with the *Animal Crossing* world, I nonetheless argue that she is trifling with the real-world logics of wellness and productivity by refuting harmful models of disability. Next, I discuss Doubleagent, a Pandaren shaman in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) who reached the level cap while playing as a pacifist. While his stated motivations for playing in this way are not exactly revolutionary, I maintain that his tacit refusal to take part in many of the activities that shape this world at war do represent a trifling with the operational logics that the game holds dear. Finally, I look to two players' separate attempts to walk to the furthest reaches of a *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011) world, a feat which, like Doubleagent's hours of picking herbs to level up, takes multiple months of real-time play. I argue that what this play *does* in the *Minecraft* world (that is, threaten to bring it to a grinding halt) makes it an emblematic case of trifling that threatens to change a system from within.

Across all of these case studies, I also lift out several lessons about the shape of radical slowness itself. As I will establish in Chapter 1, radical slowness itself is not something that I see at work in the world, but rather an ideal that I suggest we might strive towards and in that striving arrive at a critical re-evaluation of the intersectional politics of time. Straznickas' play serves as an

effective case study for understanding how we might catch glimpses of radical slowness in the world while understanding that even such fleeting moments can have a measurable impact.

Meanwhile, Doubleagent's pacifist play reminds us that no practice is *inherently* radical or hegemonic while demonstrating the importance of attending to both the context of a given practice as well as what that practice is *doing* within a given system of rules.

Finally, the long walks to the end of *Minecraft* serve as an effective model and metaphor for how the critical potential of slowness can be pushed to such an extent that it might move beyond mere trifling and into discontinuing the system altogether through what I call the critical potential of the crash.

With all of this said and done, I then conclude by reviewing the overall argument of the dissertation and discussing the work that remains to be done, how such labour might look, and a reflection of what accomplishing our goals may yield for the individual and the world. This involves looking for signs of a radically slow praxis in the practices and movements of everyday life, among other things. Having critiqued organized efforts like the Slow Food or Wholesome Games movements in Chapter 2, I use the clarity we gain in Chapter 5 as a lens to discuss recent sociopolitical phenomena which speak truth to power in the struggle against zugzwang. After connecting these efforts to everything that I have discussed in this dissertation about games-as-systems and the critical potential of play, I conclude by re-stating my hope that we may do as de Koven suggests and raise the stakes infinitely.

Every Beginning has an End

Long ago in the days of yore, I took some courses in creative writing and one of the most common pieces of advice was to "write what you know," the idea being that your work will sound more true - more resonant - if it comes from a place of lived experience. And while I generally think that this is fine advice, I do see a great deal of value in writing about certain things that one *does not* know. Indeed, I see myself as doing both in this dissertation.

It is difficult to tell where exactly we begin – my parents’ decision to move house, their being born working class to begin with, the very invention of material wealth itself – but part of the purpose of this introduction has been to show that zugzwang and its consequences are things that I know of personally and that trouble me deeply. As such, I see much of what follows as an effort on my part to speak of and against this lived socioeconomic reality, both as it impacts me and as it leaves so many others awash in exhaustion as well. In so doing, I have endeavoured to neither appropriate those experiences which are not my own, nor do I wish to flatten all vectors of oppression into one monolithic term like exhaustion. Under neoliberal, late capitalism, everyone is unhappy in their own way and the details presented in this dissertation are doubtless grounded in my *writing what I know* of that.

By situating that distress in the term exhaustion, my hope is rather to take those many specters that dance and torment us like shadows cast over our minds and bodies and distill them into something we can grapple with and imagine doing without. That imagining, that living and loving and working ‘as if’ a better world is possible is my *writing what I do not know*. Where this road leads, I cannot say, but what I *can* show is some of the ways that the current system perpetuates itself to the benefit of the few and the detriment of the many. What I *can* show is that there is a critical potential inherent in the action of the individual and, better still, the collective. What I therefore *argue* is that we should strive for something like radical slowness as a way of giving ourselves a *break* in both senses of the word, as a way of carving out the time and space necessary to imagine and indeed enact alternatives to the oppressive status quo. Resting can also be arresting, but of whom or what is ours to determine.

Chapter 1 - Life is a Game(space) and We're All in Zugzwang: Exhausting Games, (Re)Generative Play, and a Radically Slow Revolution

1.1 - A Lesson in Zugzwang

Although I believe that one of the strengths of exhaustion as an analytic framework is that it is an intuitive and fairly universal experience under neoliberal capitalism, I still wish to ensure that my framing of the concept is understood. To that end, I have found that one effective way of explaining exhaustion as well as the systemic relations which are its root cause is through a metaphor that is fittingly set within one of the oldest and best-known games of all. In chess, the term *zugzwang* (a portmanteau the German *zug*, or move, and *zwang*, compulsion) refers to a position whereby *the obligation to make a move places a player at a disadvantage*. For instance, consider a chessboard with the following arrangement of pieces:

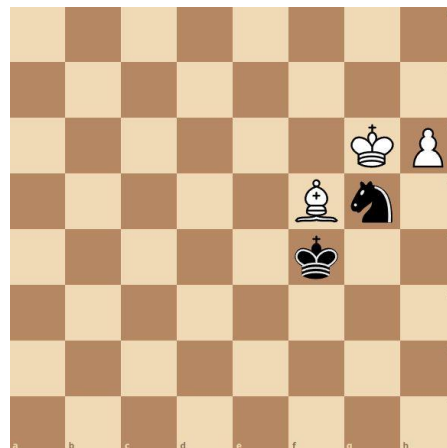


Fig. 2 Chessboard (State #1)

Clearly, this game is nearing its end. Moves have been made and pieces have been taken until finally we have arrived at this climactic point. Depending on your familiarity with the rules of chess, the situation may seem evenly matched. White has a pawn which is nearing Black's end of the board (which, if reached, would result in the pawn being promoted to a piece of White's choice, including the all-powerful queen), but Black's knight is threatening exactly where the pawn wants to go (h7). The pawn is at no risk of capture for now but moving any further would result in certain

death. Meanwhile, Black is at a slight piece deficit, but a knight is generally considered to be as valuable as a bishop, so the difference is minor.

And so there they sit.

One player might look up from the board at their opponent and say, “Your move.”

But who is speaking?

While it is most common to learn the rules of chess by developing an understanding of how each piece is allowed to move across the board, this approach only makes implicit what is arguably an equally fundamental rule of the game: on each player’s turn they *must* move one of their pieces from one space to another. Slow and contemplative though chess may often be, there is ultimately no standing still, no rest, no stoppage. Given this, if it is White’s turn (and Black was speaking) then they have to tread a little carefully. They cannot move their pawn quite yet, but they also have no way to remove the threat of Black’s knight. Or do they? Given that completion of their turn will pass it back over to Black who can only move their king (which currently protects the knight) or their knight itself, it seems that all White has to do is be patient and move in such a way that does not weaken their position. Moving the white king one space to the left is a good move here for that reason, so let us do that:

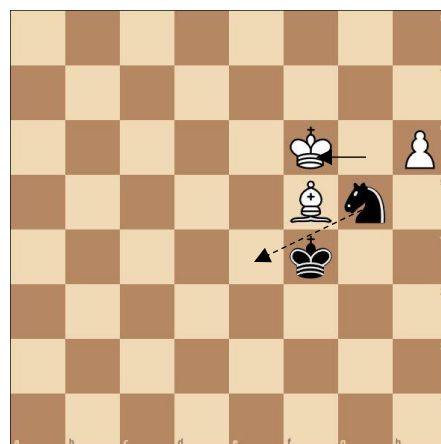


Fig. 3 Chessboard (State #2)

Once it becomes Black’s turn, they can either move their king or their knight. The only legal move for their king is to move directly backwards, which leaves the knight open for capture and while the

knight can put the White king in check by moving to e4 (see the dotted line), doing so also results in the knight being captured, in this case traded for White's bishop, leaving Black with only their king and White just a few moves away from promoting their pawn and slowly closing in on a victory. It is not the greatest position to be in, but what if it was not White's turn to play?

If we revisit our original board again and we say that it is Black's turn, a turn in which they of course *must* move, then what happens? Like the board state in Fig. 3, any move Black makes will damage their overall position. Moving the king spells doom for the knight, so the only option is to move the knight to f3. Of all the spaces the Black knight can move, this is the only one which does not lead to its immediate capture. Black would almost certainly prefer *not* to make this move, though, since it puts them at a decided disadvantage – White's pawn has free passage to promotion and with the combined threat of a king *and* queen to menace Black, the game will almost certainly end in checkmate and a victory for White.²⁷

Returning to the original board state, then, because Black has not yet lost but also has no way to act that could meaningfully benefit them, we may say that the side is *in zugzwang*. In some board states, the question of whose turn it is to play can drastically alter one's likelihood of winning, but here we find that in both cases Black would much rather stay put, while the rules of the game force it towards an unavoidable oblivion. In chess, coaxing someone into such a position is one of many paths to victory, but in the larger games of everyday life, zugzwang becomes a metaphor for the state of many individuals who necessarily live under social and economic systems larger than themselves. When I speak of zugzwang in this dissertation, I am speaking of *the obligation we all feel to move* – to live and to sustain our living – and my interest is primarily in the toll this takes on our minds and bodies (i.e. *exhaustion*) such that we are perpetually locked into picking costly moves instead of pausing to seek new strategies, or indeed a new game altogether.

²⁷ The game could end in a stalemate but that would require White to make one or more errors. Though there are other types of zugzwang in chess, including situations in which *both* players would much rather not move, this one is the most illustrative of the concept as I deploy it in this dissertation.

1.2 - Zugzwang in Everyday Life: Energy, and the Problem of Institutions

There is a notion that has been passed down by a number of theorists of empire and revolution that despite the reach and weight of State and institutional power, such oppression “increases the potential for liberation” because, in short, the sheer scale and (over)reach of these foes forces them to contend with a much larger population than any earlier hierarchies (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 44). I came across this claim time and again when reading through dense works of critical theory that all promised that the present system “makes possible transformations of the State-form through revolution” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 385). For these authors it was always a question of *when* rather than *if* meaningful change would occur. And yet, here we sit decades after these promises were made, encountering things like the Trump presidency and the rise of cryptocurrency which suggest that the only radicality our present system permits is that which perpetuates the status quo. These and other phenomena producing both exhausting news stories and of the social and economic disenfranchisement of many.²⁸

Out of a desire to join Keeling in working ‘as-if’ the revolution would one day come, then, I thought it best to begin my project by asking myself *why* it had yet to take place, and this is how I arrived at *exhaustion* as perpetuated by *zugzwang*. In the game of everyday life, *zugzwang* is a force that drains and disadvantages us in ways that it does not the other ‘side’ of this metaphorical chess match. For indeed, can one truly speak of an abstract institution such as the State expending something like energy in the same way that an individual actor might? Can one compare the consequences that are experienced by individuals to the consequences faced by institutions when either fails to make timely and effective moves? One need only think of the consequences faced by

²⁸ Critical to recognize here is that the exhaustion is not just from my authorial vantage point as a skeptic or critic – it affects even active participants in these phenomena that promised to lift supporters out of their circumstances. See any number of stories of people who met personal ruin due to decisions to participate in Trumpist rallies or the January 6, 2021 attack on Congress, or indeed the many crypto schemes where people invested thousands on virtual, speculative assets whose creators took the money and ran.

the United States for its national debt (approximately \$30 trillion at the time of writing) when compared to those faced by individuals who don't pay a \$100 utility bill.

Such a comparison reveals that there really is no comparison, and it is in this way that the metaphor of zugzwang falls apart but in a way that is in fact *helpful* for our purposes.

The perpetual exhaustion of zugzwang in everyday life, of the necessity of being ever on one's feet without making any progress, is only further emphasized if we recall that in chess, zugzwang is a state which is reached from an initial equilibrium. Other than White getting to go first²⁹, both sides start with the same level of strength and the same privileges and opportunities. Once one has the unfortunate realization that they are in zugzwang, they know that the game at hand is drawing to a close. As for the zugzwang that I perceive in everyday life, one is more often than not born into this state already and may live their entire life that way. Unlike chess, the "win condition" in the neoliberal, capitalist games of everyday life is the continued reaping of profitable resources in perpetuity,³⁰ and this goal is far easier for those people with the capital necessary to transcend the need to spend their own energy.³¹ Here again we might think of Berlant and of the phrase *slow death* – even if we see the various ways that we and society at large are trending towards extinction, we are too tired to do anything but let these facts crash over us like a tide that never goes out, weighing us down and exhausting us.

For a more concrete example of institutional zugzwang in practice, consider Sara Ahmed's discussion of the feminist complaint, an orientation towards a larger entity in which "mere persistence can be an act of disobedience" (2014, para. 37). Complaint, here, is the practice of calling out a system which renders itself uninhabitable to certain bodies in such a way that also

²⁹ While the debates around this are extensive and the studies conducted on the subject are many, White's first-move advantage accounts for about a 2-5% advantage for that side in competitive play (Streeter, 1946).

³⁰ I am reminded of Suits' notion of the "open game" – "a system of reciprocally enabling moves whose purpose is the continued operation of the system" (2014, p. 146).

³¹ As we will discuss in Chapter 3, I do not believe that even the very wealthy can truly escape the necessity of expending some energy through labour, but it is still clear that there is a massive disparity between that and the energy required to persist while working class.

makes it “costly to expose how [this oppression] works” (2018, para. 10). Ahmed herself became illustrative of this ‘cost’ when she resigned from her position at Goldsmith’s and left the physical institution of Academia.³²

Although I will complicate the concept of exit in Chapters 3 and 5, particularly with reference to video games as escapist fantasies, Ahmed’s case, as well as those that she continues to amplify by speaking out against institutional oppression, describe individuals being forced out of spaces that they can “no longer inhabit” by a system that does not support them (2016a, para. 12). I argue that such cases are all examples of zugzwang – while fighting against institutional violence, these individuals were all worn down to the point that the cost and the risks associated with persistence (i.e. continual movement) became too great. By making the (doubtless as necessary as it was reluctant) decision to exit from such spaces, the oppressive actions occurring within those institutions are able to continue with less scrutiny while those who left still experience residual exhaustion from these experiences while also being drained in other areas of their daily lives. After all, such depletion does not only occur at the workplace.

To grasp the pervasiveness of zugzwang, let us look to Freeman’s work on “chrononormativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (Freeman, 2010, p. 3). It is a process through which “flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation” based on a predetermined series of “socioeconomically ‘productive’” milestones (birth, marriage, death) that come to signify “what it means to have a life at all” (p. 3, 4-5). For Freeman, it is nothing less than capitalism’s “theft of the body’s capacities” (p. 51). In a system where only the productive survive, acting and re-acting is a necessity that wears down the individual, often leaving them too worked to do much more than continue to survive. Any energy that might be spent on mounting the critical theorist’s revolution is instead needed to make next month’s rent. In Freeman’s queer theory framework in particular, one

³² See Ahmed, 2016

gets the sense that the very process of having one's body be perceived is both instrumentalizing and exhausting.³³ *The exhaustion of bodies (here both the extraction of people-as-resource for productive ends and the cultivation of fatigue to hamper dissent) is how the status quo is maintained. The machine needs people to keep it running and it keeps those who would benefit most from any lasting systemic change too exhausted to do more than what they must to survive.*

Here I suggest that the orientation of living "as-if" the revolution will come is itself a source of exhaustion but also the only solution to zugzwang. I have found no better illustration of this than an exaggerated scenario devised by Crozier and Friedberg in their discussion of an actor's relative freedoms within a system larger than themselves:

An actor remains free to ignore the lessons of experience by beating his head continually against a wall in the hope, perhaps illusory that one day the wall will give way. And it may actually come to pass that, against all expectation, the wall *will* give way...

(1980, p. 58)

Bleak though this may seem, I believe the contemporary moment demands precisely this battered sort of hope. There is no readymade solution to breaking out of zugzwang and yet the only way to alleviate our exhaustion is to persist despite it in search of something else. While the process may be of indeterminate length and progress may be imperceptible, we cannot discount the chance that the wall will be dismantled before the individual's head.³⁴

It is my contention that by naming zugzwang and accounting for how exhaustion prevails in everyday life, both inside and, perhaps more critically, outside the walls of academia, we can develop the tools to bring us around or through it. To paraphrase a Hardt and Negri quote from the

³³ Something which can potentially be tied to other marginalized experiences and perhaps even to Foucault's notion of panopticism (1978).

³⁴ It is as Ahmed says of (not) exiting academia, "other feminists in the same situation might stay because they cannot afford to leave, or because they have not lost the will to keep chipping away at those walls" (2016a, para. 3). Though a number of systemic privileges mean that this is not necessarily a grand testament to my persistence, I identify with that latter sort of feminist scholarly practice. I think here about Moten and Harney's invitation to be "in, but not of" the university and to use such privileged access to the institution to "steal what one can" (2013, p. 26). It is the *type* of work one does and not the *medium* in which they do it that aligns it with the business of hitting walls and living as if they may one day crack and crumble.

Introduction, the revolution cannot be accomplished through theory alone.³⁵ And as Love notes when speaking of energy, grief, and grievance among marginalized³⁶ subjects, feelings of defeat and depletion are not cause to “not fight back; it only means that we need to think harder about how to bring that aspiration in line with the actual experience of being under attack” (2007, p. 14). And again, from Deleuze: we must move past “fear or hope” as passive feelings and instead actively channel those affects into the work of “look[ing] for new weapons” (1992, p. 178). This is the point at which I see the potential for play and games to make a meaningful intervention.³⁷ But to say more first requires that we zero in on an agreed-upon meaning for words like *game* or *play* since their definitions are by no means agreed upon.

1.3 - Defining Game and Play

As noted in the introduction, my interest in games as an object of study stems from three principal factors:

- *They are objects which inform and are informed by culture.* By this I mean that we can learn a lot about the norms and assumptions of everyday life through how they are (en)coded into games.
- *They are an exemplary media of Empire.* Games are media objects which emerge out of a militaristic past and which necessarily to ideological and biopolitical *work* to reify the status quo. This is achieved partly through the mechanisms described in point #1, but also ties to the nature of games as leisure objects (as well as the nature of leisure itself), which will be discussed below and more extensively in Chapter 3.

³⁵ A point that will become particularly salient in Chapter 5 when we arrive at a discussion of recognizing radical slowness in play practices.

³⁶ Although Love’s focus is on queerness and queer people, I do not imagine it controversial to expand these sentiments along intersectional lines to all who are variously drained and defeated by hegemony. As we will see when discussing Sharma’s work in Chapter 3, experiences of time differ along intersectional vectors of privilege. As noted in the Introduction, my wish is not to flatten all experiences of oppression into one – rather, I see exhaustion as a concept that transcends any one lived experience under neoliberal capitalism which therefore offers all marginalized people a united front against which to organize, even as the ways we are exhausted vary.

³⁷ This will be returned to at various points in my analysis, but I wish to make clear from the outset that I am cognizant of the fact that certain types of games as leisure objects inherently privilege certain types of people who have a particular access to the time and money needed to play. Even so, Chess (2017) and others have shown that there exist many titles (often mobile games) which are designed around shorter play sessions and less money spent up-front (in ways that we may critique just as readily as we might expropriate).

- *Following Wark, they are the very form of life and death itself.* The study of games has bearing on the study of all rule-based systems which are navigated by actors for a variety of ends.

From this, it should become clear that when I speak of games, I am sometimes speaking of the media object, sometimes speaking of the operational logic (what I often call the games of everyday life), and sometimes speaking of both at once. I have endeavoured to be as deliberate as possible when describing each sort of game throughout this dissertation, but I also feel that some amount of porousness between these two senses of the term is epistemologically useful since the exact boundaries between these concentric systems of rules is not always clear.

Given this, my operating definition of ‘game’ is one whose deliberate simplicity is in service of allowing it to properly account for the size and scope of my dual occupation with games as playable media and as an operational logic. For my purposes, *a game is any system of rules that is navigated (played, followed, subverted, etc) by players.* To those familiar with other definitions of game, this may seem like an exceedingly barebones account of the word. Indeed, even Suits’ famous definition of games³⁸ allows for both rules *and* goals. While I admit that his was the definition of games that I initially used, my research has since prompted me to forego the necessity of goals.³⁹

Indeed, if I want to follow Wark and suggest that larger systems of power are all games, then what brings about an end to the play other than one’s running out of life, energy, or capital? What *goal* denotes success and allows one to safely say the game is over?⁴⁰ Even if we suggest people can develop individual goals here, given how vast and multifaceted gamespace is, how many people can actually be said to agree on what the goals of a given game are despite all being subject

³⁸ Suits defines games as “attempt[s] to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means provided by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such an activity [lusory attitude]” (2014, p. 43).

³⁹ Beyond the reasons provided in this chapter, my choice also stemmed from concepts that will be discussed later in the dissertation, such as queer failure, Arendt’s sense of labour as maintenance, and the boredom of leisure.

⁴⁰ Again, recalling Suit’s notion of the open game, the system here is one that seeks to perpetuate itself for as long as possible. The game as an institution therefore works with my earlier discussion of zugzwang since, while these games need people to play and maintain them, they also exist independently of any one person.

to the same rules? And how many games are tools of empire whose only purpose (goal?) is to *proceed indefinitely*, to drain those playing it by offering apparent but unattainable goals for those who have no recourse but to play along?

By framing games in this way, I align myself with the work of others who have attempted to push our sense of these rule-based systems beyond common sense definitions. I think here of Ruberg's asking whether, when playing a game, "players [must] consent to fun? What oppression does the promise of fun enact?" (2019, p. 158). By framing their analysis in this way, Ruberg writes that they "are arguing here against the dominant assumption that video games should be first and foremost 'fun'" (p. 158). Indeed, as we will discuss below the supposed fun and frivolity of games is often used to mask many of the more nefarious values that games (the object) espouse or that games (the logic) crystallize. This notion of what games "do" in the world is central to my analysis.

By moving beyond popular definitions and instead treating games as both object *and* logic, I am able not only able to offer critical readings and re-writings of games and their role in society, as Murray, Ruberg, and others have done, but also to analyze and critique the games that we play even when we are unplugged from any hardware or outside of any magic circles. However, to do so requires that we also seek to define play.

Like 'game', play is a word whose exact meaning is often contested. In contrast to Huizinga and Caillois, Gadamer complicates the notion that play is wholly voluntary when he writes that "all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game, [...] consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players [...] The real subject of the game [...] is not the player but the game itself." (1989, p. 106). Reading this in concert with my sense of game as any system of rules that we navigate has certain implications for how we construct a definition of play here. As noted by Sutton-Smith (1997), "One cannot talk loosely about play meaning freedom without taking into account the specific kind of bonding that then reigns over the player's being" (1997, p. 183). And while Gadamer

still allows for the play act to *begin* with a player's willful submission to the rules of a game, this is only accurate if we consider the game as an object and ignore the game as a logic.

Play, for my purposes, is therefore defined as *an individual's practice of operating within a set of rules*. Given what I have already stated, it cannot be cordoned off from 'ordinary' life and, based on the present discussion, play is not always voluntary either. If a game is any system of rules that is navigated by players, then there are clearly games that are involuntary or, more accurately, *necessary* for one to play if they wish to maintain themselves.⁴¹ I am not referring merely to the 'game' of eating enough food or drinking enough water here. One *must* work to afford these necessities. One *must* make good use of their leisure time in order to work well enough to afford to eat and drink. One *must* download a meditation app on their phone in order to remember to take the breaks that make them a better worker. "Once more the wheel turns" (Huizinga, 2014, p. 200).⁴²

Here again I see my work as being in conversation with contemporary efforts towards a critical, cultural game studies which asks that we attend to even our most sacred definitions and interrogate what work they do in the world. Trammell, for instance, writes that "by defining play only through its pleasurable connotations, the term holds an epistemic bias towards people with access to the conditions of leisure" (2020, para. 1). He is similarly critical of the idea that play is always voluntary, a position he elaborates by distinguishing between the player and "the played" (para. 18). And while he focuses largely on the lived experiences of Black Americans, we would do well to approach every game (as I think Trammell ultimately suggests we should) by asking who

⁴¹ This subverts Suits' (2014) notion of the lusory attitude in interesting ways that relate to play and complicity. I am also reminded of work that relates dark play practices to Bateson and the notion of not being able to tell whether one is at play or not (Mortensen et al 2015).

⁴² Worth noting here is a seldom-cited portion of *Homo Ludens* that comes towards the end of the text. Huizinga devotes the final few pages of his text to defending against "the philosophical short-circuit that would assert all human action to be play" (Huizinga, 2014, p. 211). I find his suggestion that "our moral conscience will at once provide the touchstone" seems wholly unsatisfactory given, for example, the post-Fordist notion of the 'labour of love'. I am not certain whether anyone has spoken at length of this unresolved tension.

plays and who *is played* in addition to discussing who has access to leisure and what conditions make such access possible for some but not others.

The escapist fantasy of quitting one's job and living 'off the grid' seems at first to gesture toward one's ability to stop playing these games, but as will be discussed below, for many, this is a privilege that one may work for without ever reaching and even those who arrive at the promised land may be disappointed by what awaits them. Such a goal is also doubtless spurred by the alienation that is so characteristic of neoliberal individualism, and which discourages the formation of any collective large and persistent enough to enact meaningful change.⁴³ While exit and escape are themes that will be returned to throughout this analysis, for now it will suffice to suggest that any promise of exit that presently exists is only a removal from one's immediate circumstances and not from the system which perpetuates such ills to begin with. We have to get more creative if we want to step off the chessboard, but to do so, of course, requires that our energy not be exhausted elsewhere.

Although my definition of play may seem too broad, or even too fatalistic, it has a lot in common with Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) definition of play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (p. 304). This *freedom* of movement (which I read as distinct from suggesting that all of one's actions are *voluntary*) is arguably part of what informs the critical theorist's claim that our oppression will give way to revolution,⁴⁴ and I agree that it is vitally important to remember the agency of actors within these monolithic systems. This will become particularly apparent in Chapter 5 when we discuss trifling, radical slowness and video game play. But beyond serving as

⁴³ Although Federici rightly notes that the neoliberal "development of self-management" and "self-mastery" is effective for outsourcing the responsibilities of a government onto its people and sustaining the illusion of agency, this enforced 'freedom' to make one's way in the world arguably creates opportunities for resistance even as other facets of the system render us too tired to find them (Federici, 2004, p. 149).

⁴⁴ For example - "the very conditions that make the State [...] possible [...] continually recreate unexpected possibilities for counterattack" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 422). This sentiment, while not without its appeal, is cast in a new light by *zugzwang*. It also makes me think of Lorde's famous proclamation that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (2007, p. 2).

cultural analogues for the logics of everyday life and rigid structures in which to work at moving freely, what good are video games in mounting revolution?

In speaking of these virtual worlds, Crawford writes that they “provide safe ways to experience reality” through which one can explore “the psychological experiences of conflict and danger while excluding their physical realizations” (1982, p.15, p.14). While this claim has its limitations (the problem of toxicity and harassment in online games immediately comes to mind), there is nonetheless a certain common sense to it. If my avatar dies or takes damage in a game, I am not similarly harmed in real life⁴⁵ and, as I have discussed previously and will again mention below, in games like *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2001), which involve the collecting and spending of currency, “one can ‘play with’ a particular version of going into debt, but this does not extend beyond the game itself” (Scully-Blaker, 2019, p. 4).⁴⁶ As such, it may be that the relative safety one gains by encountering certain lived experiences in a virtual world may equally be used to interrogate or even mitigate zugzwang from a distance even as we still live within it in our daily lives.

If we therefore accept that games (the object) are a “safer” way to interact with cultural norms, power within hegemonic systems, and indeed the operational logic of game, then it follows that the play of video games can enable us to become *players* of some of the logics and assumptions through which we are routinely *played* in the hegemonic games of everyday life. Recalling the Introduction, if all games are containers of culturally and hegemonically ingrained meaning, then there must be games which address, either implicitly or explicitly, the myriad forms of oppression

⁴⁵ There are of course exceptions to this rule, from art pieces like *PainStation* and *Tekken Torture Tournament* to eSports and other play practices which tie one’s livelihood to playing well. While the examples of the former sort are arguably made out of a desire to convey this exact disconnect between video games and real life, the latter cases are more complex and will be touched on to an extent in Chapter 3. Even so, I believe that one could only argue against the broader premise, that video games are “safer” than real life, in bad faith.

⁴⁶ Again, many mobile games build bridges to one’s real-life financial well-being (or ruin) through microtransactions, but this does not defeat the larger premise so much as give it depth by opening up avenues for further inquiry.

felt by marginalized people, including those that exhaust us and hold us in zugzwang. It may therefore be possible that engaging with these same forces in a virtual world allows one, removed from the visceral precarity of making do on a daily basis, to occupy a more critical stance, to learn how the business of the dominant is made and perhaps how it may be *un-made*.

This, in so many words, is the primary conceit of this dissertation.

Rather than looking to games as a leisurely escape from the drudgerous labour of maintaining oneself as a subject of empire, I instead look to and expand upon earlier theorists by suggesting that leisure exists only to enable and, in many ways, *produce* more labour – to sustain our exhaustion. I therefore ask whether there is a way to work both *on* and *at* leisure so that it counteracts the mechanisms of zugzwang and the logics of neoliberal, late capitalism. More pointedly, I ask whether we can become *better* players of video games, not in the sense of some illusion of heteropatriarchal mastery but as a means to become *better* players of culture so that we might stall the business of the dominant while reclaiming access to the free and open leisure idealized by play theorists. I sometimes call this *(re)generative play* since it brings rest and, with it, energy that can be spent on imagining and enacting the sort of moves that build alternatives to the status quo.

In this sense, my commitment to working *as if* the revolution will come compels me to ask whether we might learn to play critically and in a way that (to put it tritely) changes the game altogether. While I already defined critique in the introduction and spoke of some of the ways that readers/actors can critique texts/systems, I now wish to unpack the notion of video game play as a critically restful act. While radical slowness itself will only be the object of Chapter 5, each of the following chapters will aim to account for various manifestations of criticality at play to some extent and so a preliminary discussion is warranted.

1.4- The Critical, (Re)Generative Potential of Play

The endlessly necessary and necessarily endless work of critique is exerted on many fronts. Given my desire to combat exhaustion so that we may find the energy necessary to express new ways of being, this dissertation is interested in locating instances of such *(re)generative play* (i.e. play that both is restful and creative in ways germane to this larger critical project) as it occurs *in and around* games, so that we might equally identify or imagine parallel play practices that do similar critical work *outside* of games. While I see the potential for a certain amount of novelty in this approach, the basic notion that play can be critical is not new.

In coining her version of the term *critical play*, Flanagan writes that it “means to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life” (Flanagan, 2009, p.6). The core idea here is that game designers can consciously facilitate a “culture of play [...] in which participants find a space for permission, experimentation, and subversion” which may ultimately lead to critical reflection (p. 13). This assertion, in turn, stems from the core tenet of procedural game design, which consists of “authoring arguments through processes” (Bogost, 2007, p. 29). For Flanagan, then, games which are encoded with potentially radical values by designers will engender critical consciousness in those who play them.

While Chapters 3 and 4 will make use of my deliberately broad definition of play to frame game design as a sort of critical play all its own,⁴⁷ I will note here that I am somewhat wary of solutions to the exhausting mechanisms of late capitalism which privilege the designer as the arbiter of meaning since “goals imposed from above, no matter how magnanimous they are, necessarily result in bureaucratic dictatorship” (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980, p. 251). Recalling Hall, while the messages that are encoded in media objects are supremely important, to focus on this process at the expense of how these messages are decoded ‘in the wild’ not only ignores one

⁴⁷ A claim which, if present in Flanagan’s choice to say ‘create or occupy’ in the above quote is not made explicit in her work, to my knowledge.

half of this ecosystem, but risks replicating the same entrenched hierarchies of power that have enabled the oppression and injustices that these game designers would seek to combat. While Chapter 4 will examine the role of video game design in building critical collectivity, we must also attend to video game play.

In speaking of video games as texts that are ‘read,’ Aarseth argues that they fit the definition of what he calls “ergodic literature,” or any text in which “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse” it (1997, p. 1). Situating video games as texts which are navigated by players allows him to argue that, recalling Barthes’ death of the author or the binding of oppression and the potential for revolt, “even (and especially) the most authoritative texts include the means of their own destruction” (p. 122). Unsurprisingly, then, the question of whether video game play can be a subversive or even political act has been considered by many authors.

Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter use the term “counter-play” to refer to the “autonomous invention power” given form in video games made by Cold War-era “hackers and hobbyists” that was ultimately captured by the games industry to “set in motion a multi-billion dollar cultural industry” (2005, para. 4). Here we not only see the notion of critical play emerging with reference to design, but doing so in a manner that shows the ways that the status quo can absorb counter-cultural movements and voices.⁴⁸ It is not until the writing of Galloway (2006) that we see a specific call for “radical gameplay” as a means to supplement the many critical experiments of game designers, artists, and hackers (2006, p. 125). However, this call comes late in the text and Galloway ultimately concludes that “countergaming is an unrealized project” (p. 126). Given what brought me to his work, Galloway’s conclusion cannot help but ring hollow for me like the promise that oppression leads to revolt. Galloway clearly struggles to find a concrete model of countergaming that may serve as a way out of hegemony.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See Fiske (2003) on the cycle of expropriation and incorporation here.

⁴⁹ Since 2006, other authors (see Franklin (2009) Chien (2010), and Meades (2015) for example). have of course made similar arguments about the importance of countergaming, however few have done much more

Apperley brings us closer to understanding the dynamics and overall significance of counterplay when he writes:

Counterplay challenges the validity of models of play that suggest digital games compel the players' to play according to encoded algorithms, which they must follow exactly in order to succeed. Instead, it opens the possibility of an antagonistic relationship between the digital game and player. An antagonism that is considerably more high stakes than the player overcoming the simulated enemies, goals and challenges that the game provides, rather it is directed towards the ludic rules that govern the digital games configurations, processes, rhythms, spaces, and structures.

(2010, p. 102-3)

As we have established, I share Apperley's contention that play can serve the purpose of "understanding and using the limits of the virtual space" and in fact use this quality of play to suggest ways that we may equally acquaint ourselves with the limits of possibility under the hegemonic games of everyday life (p. 103).^{50 51}

than suggesting, as Galloway did, that it is important. Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter return to the concept in *Games of Empire* when they write that "the slogan of every gamer is 'another world is (temporarily) possible'" (2009, p. xxxiii). They later describe "six pathways of multitudinous activity" operating within game culture, although most of their examples are hampered by their being design-centric (2009, p. 191). In *Play Redux* (2010), Myers also advocates for play's "capacity to *break free*," however this is undercut by his bemoaning the loss of "Natural Law" as the guarantor of play's freedom, under fire from the "increasingly realistic interfaces and operating systems" that undergird virtual play (2010, p. 162). Given the concept of Wark's *gamespace*, I am inclined to argue that greater realism is desirable here since in some ways it begs the question of whether, in the pursuit of immersion or graphical realism, video games may also become more transparent in how they realistically echo the norms and assumptions of everyday life.

⁵⁰ Of similar importance here are scholars like Schleiner who characterizes the power relation between player and game in this way: games are built of a "rule space" which necessarily "takes over the player" – to play at all, "the player submits to the game's regime" (2019, p. 10-11). However, Schleiner argues that "players also design and play their own games, thereby seizing back some of that which was lost to the game," a "transformative process" which she coins "*ludic mutation*" (p. 11). As will become evident in Chapter 5, this notion of the player mutating the system from within is an appealing one for my purposes. Even so, I Schleiner (like many other scholars who describe some version of 'critical play') leans too heavily on the types of playful critique undertaken by specialized, often educated practitioners such as artists, designers, and hackers. Part of the appeal of situating criticality in play for me is that it is something we are *all* capable of doing.

⁵¹ In this sense, while this dissertation centers video games, I am ultimately hoping to contribute to the project of speaking truth to power and mobilizing players of all sorts to work against preconceived notions of reality. I think here of work from Kishonna Gray, who speaks directly with Black women gamers about their experiences, hopes, and frustrations along with how they come to form "communities to support their identities," a process she frames as "an intersectional counterpublic" (2020, p. 20). I think of the work of Amanda Philips, who calls out gamer culture and indeed game studies itself in the spirit of voicing "the agonistic struggle of the marginalized, who are constrained by an unequal society" (2020, p. 176). I seek to learn from the life and work of people like Sara Ahmed (2006; 2018) who remains a feminist killjoy despite

Of the forms of play discussed in this dissertation, these everyday practices that we take on as a means of survival are the most elusive and seemingly unassailable, and yet they are the most pressing to my lived experience and that of many others. For my part, as someone who has written this dissertation while navigating the job market, understanding the play of scholars who variously make do within The Academy is of supreme importance. I have seen talented friends and colleagues be depleted and pushed out of their institutions. I have seen those who persevered and earned a degree struggle for years thereafter to secure a living with their work. Still others who have “made it” are harangued by a dated system and the pressure to publish and secure tenure while trying to support their departments, colleagues, and mentees (and families, and loved ones, and on, and on). Perhaps most frustratingly of all, there are those who have earned that coveted tenure and now use their power to hold the door closed behind them. Any suffering and exploitation is framed retroactively as a rite of passage and not the barely-concealed belches of a decaying system.

I often wonder whether all of this stems from *zugzwang*, whether institutions by their nature simply drain us of our energy until even those most committed to social justice are worn into the tired groove of the ever-turning wheel. After all, as Phillips notes:

Staying woke is particularly exhausting when you are also committed to pleasure, which is necessary to live a full life and ultimately the purpose of social justice activism: to provide full lives to those who are prevented from living them by cultural and institutional injustices.

(2020, p. 3)

Between the work required for one’s day job and the work of persisting against an oppressive status quo, there is little time to rest.⁵² In this context, I feel it necessary to constantly re-evaluate my sense of what it means to be an educator and what I can do to make the academy a more

being pushed out of the academy while still accounting for and thinking through ideas like those of Sarah Sharma (2017) which complicate and elucidate the ways one should and should not exit.

⁵² Here in particular I think Phillips does well to tie rest to *pleasure* – while this dissertation necessarily casts the struggle as one between rest as a coping mechanism for hegemony and rest as a revolutionary praxis, it is important to always remember that the end-goal, is this *full life*, replete with joyful relationships and activities that are presently only afforded to a privileged few and, even then a purist might argue, dampened by their being mediated through neoliberal capitalism and the social values it requires.

inclusive and generative space for putting in the work necessary to combat injustice, but it is fundamentally draining work. I feel so small in the face of something as large as the institution of the The Academy and yet I'm also cognizant of the numerous privileges I possess and from which I benefit daily, which means it must be so much worse for so many others.⁵³ We must all become better players of these institutional games so that we can force them to deliver on the promise of 'full lives', lest we get locked in a zugzwang of our own. But I digress.

Let us pause here and recall three of the definitions that I have laid out so far: **Critique** is *the work of responding to reality in ways that that destabilize and seek alternatives*. A **game** is *any system of rules that is navigated by players (actors)*. Finally, **play** is *an individual's practice of operating within a set of rules*. Though individually these definitions risk casting a wide net, when read together, I argue that they allow me to move beyond extant literature on the role of games as cultural objects and the critical, (re)generative power of play.

Play, whether in a video game or in the larger institutional games which we play (or get played) every day, is our making do within the world. "Games are political," writes Sicart (2014), "but the true political effect of these objects takes place when we occupy them" (p. 73).⁵⁴ Given that we are, at all times, occupying any number of different games, I argue that deepening our understanding of how we play these games and how they play us (or indeed enable others to play us) is paramount, as is figuring out ways that we might play differently.

Even so I do not wish to suggest that this is work that can *only* be done by someone like Wark's practitioner of "gamer theory" who has to have read *A Thousand Plateaus* before they can

⁵³ See Dial 2022 for one example of this. Specifically, they discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic and Trump's high-profile exposure to the virus (both emblematic of 'remarkable' illness and death), can be wholly recast against what they call Black asphyxia and the 'unremarkable' Black deaths that occur in America on a daily basis.

⁵⁴ While I agree with Sicart here, I note that he frustratingly undercuts this claim throughout *Play Matters* (2014) through his repeated reference to play as "carnival," a practice that supposedly "allows political action while being relatively immune to the actions of power" (p. 75). And yet, as he himself notes elsewhere (2015) through a citation of Schechner on dark play: "carnivals" are "inversions of established order which are sanctioned by the authorities" (Sicart, 2015, p. 103).

dispense revolution from on-high (2007, [255]). There are many reasons that I must speak of my own privilege in all of this. Since the critical praxis that I argue for here is grounded in play, something that we *all* do⁵⁵ my hope is that my sense of play as a (re)generative act demystifies scholarly knowledge, throws open the doors, and broadens our received notions of who is capable of destabilizing unjust realities and how we might begin to make that happen.

This is what I mean by the critical potential of play. *It is a revelatory force that lays bare a game's operational logics so that they may be subject to our scrutiny⁵⁶ just as much as it is a creative force which imagines and potentially enacts more just and more restorative ways of being. Within the bounds of this dissertation, it is also a call to players everywhere to become better readers of games as a means to become better readers and perhaps builders of culture.*

So far, I have cast exhaustion as a systemic problem through *zugzwang* and have outlined a potential lens through which to tackle this issue in games, play, and critique – now distilled into *the critical potential of play*. What remains to be seen, then, is a proposed solution to the problem as informed by the lens. To get to this solution, what I call *radical slowness*, I will first discuss theories of leisure and failure.

1.5 - The Work of Play and of Playing to Lose

With the exception of eSports, Twitch streaming, and other monetizations of play, I do not think many would balk at the suggestion that video games are objects of leisure. The question of what leisure is for (and what it *can* be for) in the contemporary moment is therefore of great importance throughout this dissertation. Here, I am particularly influenced by Agamben's claim that "we are no longer able to reach menuchah," a sacred sort of "inoperativity" that is epitomized by the Jewish Sabbath of antiquity (2011, p.106). While Agamben's apparent nostalgia for a time where a

⁵⁵ I say this cognizant of Trammel's observations on access to leisure as a privilege. Here the strength of the broadness of my definition of play is made clear since play is in point of fact something we all do regardless of our access to free time.

⁵⁶ In a manner that recalls Menkman's (2011) characterization of a glitch as an interruption and revelation of a process.

deeper rest was possible is not something he defends particularly well, the larger question of whether all human activity, even rest and leisure, ultimately “aims toward production” is an important one (p. 105).⁵⁷ While Crary has argued that “sleep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism,” Agamben, here, seems to suggest that even sleep can be viewed as a necessary reprieve from work in the service of making us ready for *more work* (2013, p. 10). Agamben’s provocation is one that I take seriously throughout this dissertation, as I have found it difficult to dismiss.

This troubling of leisure can be summarized by Lefebvre’s (1947) claim that a “critique of the everyday” is “achieved in and by leisure activities” on the one hand, and Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1944) suggestion that “under the pressure of labor [...] pleasure has learned self-hatred” on the other (Lefebvre, 1947, p. 29; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944, p. 31). Although leisure activities “cannot be separated from work” for Lefebvre, he writes that “they are *other* than everyday life [...] They can thus hold a real content, correspond to a real need, yet still retain an illusory form and deceptive appearance” (Lefebvre, 1947, p. 29, 40). While I agree that leisure activities may be an untapped force for critique and change, I also agree with Horkheimer and Adorno that leisurely pursuits are often entrenched in neoliberal, capitalist logics.

We have already suggested the importance of asking who has access to leisure and under what conditions. To this we can also add concerns about Agamben’s understanding of leisure as a form of labour all its own. Through Horkheimer and Adorno, we may equally observe that the immensity and pervasiveness of late capitalism, enlightenment logics, and the culture industry make even attempting to reframe our relationship to leisure seem altogether impossible. But part of acting as if change is attainable is the refusal to accept that it is not.

⁵⁷ For me, this also recalls Marcuse’ (1966) note that: “The basic condition of leisure is achieved by the length of the working day itself, by the tiresome and mechanical routine of alienated labor; these require that leisure be a passive relaxation and a re-creation of energy for work” (1966, p. 47-8).

A number of autonomist Marxists⁵⁸ have written helpfully on the concept of refusal, particularly as it relates to labour. At this point in the analysis, though, I am most interested in a sort of refusal discussed by queer theorists like Jack Halberstam that is known as *queer failure*. Like Freeman's discussion of chrononormativity, Halberstam writes that "success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation" (2011, p.2). As a result, he seeks to dismantle "the logics of success and failure with which we currently live", arguing instead that "under certain circumstances failing [...] may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (p.2-3). "The queer art of failure", Halberstam writes, "turns on the impossible [...] It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (p.88). Failure here is therefore a possibility space⁵⁹ for the marginalized, an untapped site of generative potential⁶⁰, albeit one that often comes at a great risk to the individual.

Indeed, the suggestion that failing is something that one can do voluntarily (i.e. 'lose' oneself in) is a contentious one. In most of the cases Halberstam describes, *choosing* failure is a misnomer since being a queer subject is not a choice. This is perhaps why Ahmed wants to suggest that "queer politics *might* involve disorientation, without legislating disorientation as a politics. It is not that disorientation is always radical" (2006, p.158).⁶¹ Living queerly is not necessarily something that one has selected for themselves but may rather be something that has been forced upon them *by the dominant*.

In this vein, elsewhere Halberstam suggests that failures of all sorts (he specifically mentions "ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed") might "productively be called 'queer subjects' in terms of the

⁵⁸ See Tronti (2005), Berardi (2009) and Federici (1974).

⁵⁹ Such a space, to me, recalls Moten and Harney's (2013) notion of the undercommons.

⁶⁰ Potentiality and futurity are important concepts within a number of queer theory texts. See Muñoz (2009) and Edelman (2004) for two starkly contrasting perspectives on this.

⁶¹ Halberstam has since helpfully addressed this tension, for more see Chapter 5 and Ruberg 2017.

ways they live” (2005, p.10). As such, while queerness holds great importance as a term one uses in constructing their identity, Halberstam leaves room to read queer failure not only as heteronormative failure, but as class failure, or racial failure, or gender failure, and so on. This intersectional view of failure comes to the fore when, in a later work, he writes that “Failure, of course, goes hand in hand with capitalism” (2011, p.88). The rules of a game are what dictates the conditions for winning and losing, after all. The locating of alternatives to the status quo is key here since, although the experience of failure is not universal among marginalized subjects, all of these modes of oppression tie back to the same overarching system in a manner that is similar to what I see in exhaustion.⁶²

It is through this framework of queerness and queer failure that we arrive at the critical potential of video games as unproductive wastes of time. Goetz argues that within the productive logics of chrononormativity, “video games are ‘queer’ precisely for [...] the pure wastefulness of energy and time spent outside the narrow strictures of hetero-reproductivity” (2017, p. 240). While he has less to say about the ways game play can be instrumentalized (something we will discuss in Chapter 3), he argues that wasting time in this way represents a model of development that eschews the rush to progress and instead carries with dominant logics. Goetz ultimately argues that “this kind of empowerment is a vibrant and important part of the pleasure taken in video games both inside and outside queer communities” (p. 245). Games, in their apparent frivolity, become a site of queer failure, a *trifling* with the dominant that re-orient the player from a productive, hegemonic subject to someone who is out of joint with normative time.

What struck me most about this sort of failure, was that the battlefield is temporal in nature. Useful for my reading of Goetz here is Freeman’s “Temporal drag,” a slowness that is deployed by marginalized people to resist the pull of the dominant as well as Halberstam’s assertion that “what

⁶² Though, to be clear, I am not suggesting that exhaustion and failure are the same thing. Instead, we might say that the material conditions of being a failure beget exhaustion.

looks like inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance” can in fact be read as “stalling the business of the dominant” (Freeman, 2010, p. 65; Halberstam, 2011, p. 88).⁶³ Just as we can identify a sort of exhaustion in slowness through Berlant’s slow death, so too might we identify a critical, even (re)generative, potential in her “lateral politics,” the sort of collectivity “where solidarity comes from the scavenging for survival that absorbs increasingly more people’s lives” (2011, p, 262).⁶⁴ People are doubtless capable of mounting collective resistance to the status quo, but the road is difficult and uncertain. Even so, to counter the exhaustion of zugzwang with rest seems an appropriate way to start.

While exploring the literatures of refusal, I also encountered Lora Mathis’ concept of “radical softness as a weapon” (Mathis, 2015). They created a series of artworks around this phrase to suggest that “sharing your emotions is a political move and a tactic against a society which prioritizes a lack of emotions” (Mathis, 2015). I immediately read this as an empowering example of Halberstam’s queer failure, a specific way that one might deliberately subvert the dominant and build solidarity through the revelation of shared experiences. When I read about Mathis’ work, I was reminded both of Amanda Phillips’ (2017) discussion of hardness, softness and hegemonic masculinity in games like *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003) and *Genital Jousting* (Free Lives 2016) as well as Salen and Zimmerman’s notion of play as “free movement within a more rigid structure” (2004, p. 304). Recast in this context, play has a certain softness to it as well that allows it to squeeze and contort into and through the hardness of rules and institutions, both in intended and unintended ways.

We will see in Chapter 3 that Ngai (2012) uses flexibility as a descriptor of the always-on, always-exhausting work that is characteristic of Post-Fordist labour models. Under the zugzwang of the present system, the *played* subject is forced to bend and overreach in ways that allow the

⁶³ This latter observation will become particularly apropos in Chapter 5 when I discuss the trifter.

⁶⁴ Once again, more will be said on this in later chapters, particularly Chapters 2 and 3 where I discuss the work of Sarah Sharma (2014).

wheels of productivity to keep turning. However, radical softness implies a malleability and a work of an entirely different sort. Rather than bending in ways that are productive of hegemonic ideals, I suggest, like Goetz, that we instead lean in to practices which waste the time of those who would see us waste away. Make no mistake, however: such a practice is not without cost. As Agamben suggests, even when we are at play, we are always at work, so the challenge is not to seek some pure form of rest from a bygone era, but rather to be deliberate in working *against* the status quo. And while the work of refusal contained in radical softness is an effective tactic for building solidarity and articulating dissent, so long as zugzwang persists, we will not have the energy to put such feelings into practice.

This is board state in which we find ourselves and it is here that arrived at a potential solution in the form of a concept of my own.

“Your move.”

1.6 - Towards a Radical Slowness

Inspired by radical softness and Goetz’ sense of games as a waste of time and grounded in my personal and intellectual concerns with exhaustion under neoliberal, late capitalism and the (re)generative potential of play, I arrived at the concept of *radical slowness*. I define it as *a deliberate failure to ‘keep up’ with the ever-accelerating rhythm of society as a political act*. It is a reclamation of slowness from the privileged division between taking one’s time and having one’s time taken. It is a refusal of labour that exhausts us and an embracing of labouring towards meaningful change. It emerges out of the lateral politics of the margins and seeks to give us to rest, to let us linger, and to build collectivity. Most importantly for this dissertation, by tarrying with the expectation that we *keep moving* it is also my attempt to counteract zugzwang and permanently quell the exhaustion it brings. By reclaiming our time, each according to our need and our capacity, it is my hope that we might deprive the games of everyday life of their fuel while also allowing

ourselves the space and the time to play with and indeed enact alternatives to the draining status quo.

To be clear from the outset, radical slowness is not a tangible “thing” in the world that one can grab hold of, nor is it a specific practice that one can adopt like something you’d find in a wellness blog. It is not a metric by which I suggest we differentiate “good” actions from “bad” nor, following my definition of game, does it have any clear goal short of taking us off the chessboard altogether. This will not happen overnight, of course, recall that we are inhabiting the revolutionary temporality of ‘as-if.’ This is an orientation towards work and play that is grounded in my sense of critique as an unending process. It is a striving for the sort of systemic change that one may find glimpses of in individual practices, but which can only truly be achieved through a collective effort and a willingness to decisively abandon grind culture before it grinds us to dust.

I readily admit that this is a lot to accept at face value – like all apparently new ideas, it will need some playtesting before we can begin to think about a proper strategy guide. There will be many things to discuss before finally arriving at some sense of a radically slow praxis in Chapter 5, beginning with *slowness itself*.

Chapter 2 - Discourses of Slowness: Patient Gamers and the Politics of Wholesomeness

2.1 - Dovahkiin introduction

On November 11, 2011 Bethesda Game Studios released a long-anticipated instalment in their Western high-fantasy RPG series, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011). It had been 4 years since the last *Elder Scrolls* game and this, coupled with promotional trailers that teased sprawling landscapes and epic duels with dragons atop frigid peaks meant that it was easily one of the most anticipated games of the year. The choice to release the game on the almost prophetic 11/11/11 was the proverbial cherry on top and a stroke of marketing brilliance. However, for my purposes, the release of *Skyrim* is only the second-most important thing to happen on this day, although it did act as a catalyst for what tops the list.

For many, this was a day to retreat from one's earthly responsibilities and embark on what was sure to be one of the most comprehensive virtual adventures ever made. For others, however, this was not the case. On the same day as *Skyrim*'s release, Reddit user jetmax25 made a post to the website's gaming subreddit entitled "Being Poor Sucks". The post consisted of a meme in the advice animals style that featured an image of the Pokémon Slowpoke accompanied by the text "I JUST BOUGHT FALLOUT NEW VEGAS. ANYBODY WANT TO TALK ABOUT THAT?" (jetmax25, 2011):



Fig. 4 jetmax25's meme

The advice animal meme typically features an image of something accompanied by a line of text that is implied to be spoken or at least emblemized by the 'thing' in question. Here, Slowpoke, a notoriously sluggish Pokémon with a permanently blank look on its face, is used to connote being behind with the times to humorous effect. Of course, just like being on the so-called cutting edge, there is a proper timing to the Slowpoke meme. In the case of this user's post, the joke is that on 11/11/11, this day-of-days when everyone is shirking their usual routines to play this shiny new game, this user cannot afford a copy of *Skyrim* and/or the hardware necessary to play it. Instead, they are happily (and sheepishly) occupying themselves with *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2010), a slightly older Bethesda game.

Perhaps due to the aforementioned hype around *Skyrim*, the post received a notable amount of attention by Reddit standards at the time. Engagement with the post ranged from users praising the poster for their choice of game, to commiserating about consuming video games long after their release. The most upvoted comment in the thread, however, came from someone who wrote, "How about a reddit for people who wait 6-18 months to buy a game because they won't\can't (sic) pay full price or have an older machine. r/patientgamers or something?" This comment spawned a chain of others that supported the idea and within thirty minutes, the subreddit r/patientgamers was created. At the time of writing, the community has over 450,000 subscribers and is self-described as:

A gaming sub free from the hype and oversaturation of current releases, catering to gamers who wait at least 6 months after release to play a game. Whether it's price, waiting for bugs/issues to be patched, DLC to be released, don't meet the system requirements, or just haven't had the time to keep up with the latest releases.

Upon first encountering this hub for players who variously take their time, it seemed to me precisely the sort of bottom-up approach to reframing leisure time that I had envisioned when I first began thinking through radical slowness and regenerative play. Surely, I thought, their harbouring such critiques of the games industry meant that these patientgamers were also

speaking of and against exhaustion, even implicitly. This chapter, among other things, chronicles the process through which I learned that the situation was not so clear-cut. Indeed, while patience can be a virtue, it can also be a necessity.

In the broadest sense, the purpose of this chapter is to set the scene of where discourses of slowness presently find themselves. In this way, my analysis here serves as the beginning of a thread that is completed in the next chapter, namely an account of why exhaustion is so pervasive and why enacting alternative ways of being is so difficult. My reader will gain not just have a sense of how slowness is framed in game culture from a variety of perspectives, but also a working understanding of how these conversations grow from and sometimes directly address the anxieties of labour and leisure under late capitalism, and how the desire for comfort and the pressure of productivity combine to keep players locked into zugzwang. By attending to the ways that slowness *feeds* exhaustion, my hope is to make our path towards later chapters which address how it might *undo* exhaustion that much clearer.

2.2 - Mapping Slow Discourses

In Chapter 1 I carried the Introduction's more common-sense notion of exhaustion through a theoretical framework which introduced other core concepts like zugzwang, (re)generative play, and radical slowness. In this chapter, I now wish to move from my own immediate set of ideas to discussing some of the ways that slowness and slow play are framed within game culture and culture at large. I do so for two main reasons:

The first stems from our earlier discussion about how alternatives to the status quo can only ultimately be reached through action. To better develop a sense of what actions may serve as an effective way forward in countering exhaustion, then, it behooves me to understand how slowness and slow play are being deployed "in the wild" in ways that would seem to aim towards achieving some sort of relaxation or pause. Doing so also helps this dissertation reach beyond my own lived experiences. Indeed, I do not wish for mine to be the only voice present in the analysis, so

my decision to place this chapter that centers other perspectives just after two sections so grounded in my own thinking is both deliberate and useful.

Second, in the process of analyzing the discourses around slow play and other like concepts, it became clear to me that many approaches, no matter how well-meaning, often did more to reify the status quo than not. While I see a critical, regenerative potential in slowing one's relation to the play and games of everyday life, it is clear both from my findings and from the wider literature that slowness is not always radical. By devoting this phase of the analysis to popular discourses that are demonstrative of this ambivalence, I see this chapter as a testament to why any efforts to counter the exhaustion of neoliberal capitalism must be carefully made.

I begin by offering a brief theoretical backdrop for discussing what I call the ambivalent politics of slowness. I start by introducing Sharma's (2014) account of the various ways that our experiences of time are less the result of personal choice and more a product of our privileges, particularly that of class.⁶⁵ From a games perspective, for instance, we might distinguish between slow gaming as a twee aesthetic of game design⁶⁶ and slow gaming caused by outmoded hardware.⁶⁷ While each of these represents an encounter with deceleration, the former relies on one having access to a certain amount of leisure time and capital while the latter represents what happens to those who, like jetmax25, cannot afford to keep up.

I then tie this dual sense of slowness as *luxury* and *hindrance* to De Certeau's (1980) notion of making do. While this theorist of everyday life sees the individual's shrewd ways of navigating a system larger than oneself as a critical and uniquely positive thing, I use my ambivalent sense of

⁶⁵ Here we might equally look to Latour's writing on the relation between "transportation and transformation," in which he compares the movements of one individual carving a path through a dense thicket while another rides a train (1997, p. 174). He argues, as I do here through concepts such as *zugzwang*, that the nature of one's movements leaves them 'marked' by time and space – the scars of the thicket are not the same as the unthinking comfort of the train ride.

⁶⁶ We will discuss a notable example of this below with wholesome games. See also *Different Tales* (n.d.) and their *Wanderlust Travel Stories* (2019) for an equally salient case.

⁶⁷ See Nicholas Hardy (2015) for one example of a forum post of this nature. Notable to me is the way that the user is blamed for owning a cheaper PC. While some offer helpful suggestions of how to improve a game's performance, others say that the correct solution is simply to buy a better computer.

slowness to suggest that such individualistic tricks for braving the status quo ultimately serve to do little more than keep one's head above water. At the same time, I also describe how, despite eschewing individualism for collectivity, many so-called *slow life* movements are equally susceptible to the ambivalent politics of slowness. Without properly attending to the very real costs associated with occupying a more relaxed state of living, such movements fail to mitigate exhaustion for any but a very privileged few.

With these considerations in mind, I move to what I see as the core of this chapter: the findings from my investigation into /r/patientgamers, the subreddit whose origin story was described above. Though "slowness in games" has not proven specific enough to foster a dedicated community, this hub for people who enjoy protracted play proved to be a very generative space for helping me connect play, labour, and exhaustion under neoliberal, late capitalism. In particular, my time spent reading through the posts made to /r/patientgamers led to my discerning a 'cycle' of player consumption. This cycle is made up of three distinct parts: comfort, nostalgia, and the gaming backlog, each of which are discussed in turn. I frame this as a cycle of consumption grounded in what I call the transactional nature of play, but it is equally a cycle of play and of dissatisfaction that keeps patientgamers in zugzwang.

While I had hoped to find that /r/patientgamers would be a case study of players resisting neoliberal, capitalist trappings of impulse purchases and self-care, what I found instead was a reification of these values and indeed of exhaustion itself. Indeed, while many users on the subreddit express disillusionment at how their ability to meaningfully enjoy video games has dwindled as they get older and have less access to free time, the most common diagnosis that I found from others on the site was not that this was a product of any larger systemic values, but rather that the users in question simply had not found the right sort of game. Rather than breeding solidarity through a shared frustration, the patientgaming subreddit defaulted here to a place for recommending a particular subset of games which I have come to describe as being designed

around *comfort* and political stasis, but which have arguably become an emerging genre all their own.

As such, I follow these patientgamer recommendations and analyze the wider phenomenon of *wholesome games*, titles which eschew combat and competition and instead embrace warmth and collaboration. To begin, I look at how taste-makers within the wholesome games movement describe themselves as well as wholesomeness itself. Then, I offer an account of the various ways that other creators and commentators responded to this label. These reactions to the wholesome epithet are situated in the larger context of the first Wholesome Direct, a major event within game culture which I also describe as part of this analysis.

While I believe that building alternative models for games and game design is a worthy undertaking, in this chapter I must still attend to the ways that the wholesome games movement is, like slowness, politically fraught. Building off of my findings on comfort and patientgaming, connect wholesomeness to this same conservative impulse towards keeping things as they are. Although the wholesome discourse is not a monolithic entity, I ultimately conclude that wholesomeness as a category is still a case of an alternative to the status quo being subsumed into the dominant logics of everyday life.

2.3 - The Ambivalent Politics of Slowness

I began this chapter with the tale of jetmax25 because it is supremely important that /r/patientgamers emerged out of the lived reality that video games are objects of leisure that not all can access. While the gaming zeitgeist was fixated on the impending release of *Skyrim*, jetmax25 was one of many players whose circumstances had them feeling behind the times. Although not every person who posts to r/patientgamers may know this origin story, it nonetheless informs the discourse that circulates within that discussion forum. While this chapter looks at a number of examples of players who practice patience in one form or another, the fact that all patientgamer conversations emerge out of these original feelings of guilt at one's poverty and outdatedness is

well worth remembering. For the moment, though, this story also reminds me of Sharma's work on time and privilege.

In *In the Meantime* (2014) she rejects the received notion that the world is only ever accelerating, instead outlining "the multiple temporalities that underlie the social fabric" to argue that "experiences of time are not just the outcome of individual choices", but in fact a privilege of class (p.110). She cleverly contrasts figures like the "frequent business traveler" whose time is so valued by capitalism that it "reorganizes the time of others" (drivers, hotel workers, cleaners, etc), to the doubly "flexible"⁶⁸ labour of yoga instructors who "cobble together several jobs" to earn a living. Sharma's choice to view the experience of time (or, we may say, exhaustion) as a classed phenomenon sheds light on the fact that "while capital develops at the expense of bodies, it makes clear which bodies will be taken care of" (p. 51, 91). Slowness, here, is shown to be a luxury for some and a hindrance to others, something that will be reflected in this chapter's findings, and which is also fundamental to this project as a whole.

To exemplify this in her own work, Sharma describes the average day at The Caretta Shiodome, a luxury skyscraper in Tokyo which boasts of "affluent living for those who want to live a slow lifestyle" (p.115). She writes that "slowness, here, is something that can be contained, literally built from the ground up" and while she is referring to the physical structure of the skyscraper itself, capital too is being used to contain and control this particular version of slowness (p. 118). For those who can afford to live in the building, "life is easy, because it is full-service at all times" (p. 118). In a peculiar inversion of Virilio's (1977) claim that "speed is time saved in the absolute sense of the word," (p. 46) here, "what makes life slow is the elimination of pursuits that might be considered a waste of time" (Sharma, 2014, p. 118). It is one's class privilege which serves as the primary factor for determining which way one will experience slowness, whether as a source

⁶⁸ Again, see Ngai (2012) on Post-Fordist labour.

of comfort or of exhaustion. One is a lifestyle that is bought and sold by those who can afford to escape necessity while the other is inherited by those who need to work to afford their survival.

Through this we arrive at one of the key tenets of this dissertation: *slowness itself is not inherently emancipatory*. To elaborate on this, let us reconsider De Certeau's discussion of how we 'make do' in our daily lives. While he uses the term to refer to the various ways that actors can operate within and against systems larger than themselves,⁶⁹ we might just as easily imagine Sharma's business traveler saying "I make do" with a knowing smirk when asked what their annual salary is, or her yoga instructor saying they "make do" by skipping lunch to teach an extra class each day. And so while De Certeau sees *making do* as a uniquely subversive act, if one is exhausted, we may rather see making do as an exercise in keeping one's head above water which, while doubtless necessary, does not strike me as likely to produce meaningful change.⁷⁰ It is for this reason that my entry into writing this chapter was characterized by a healthy skepticism towards any number of the organized efforts towards *slow life*.

Among these, the Slow Food movement is one of the first and the best-known examples of a collective which celebrates taking one's time. What began in Italy as a political and ideological gesture to protest the opening of a McDonald's near Rome's Spanish Steps has grown into an international group that seeks to "prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions, counteract the rise of fast life and combat people's dwindling interest in the food they eat" (Slow

⁶⁹ For De Certeau, power appears to be something one can claim for themselves as a means either of enforcing or carving out a space of autonomy within order. When power is deployed from on-high, it is in service of "strategy," which encapsulates all that is planned – "a place that can be circumscribed as proper (propre) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it" (p. xix). When power is seized from below, however, it is in the execution of a "tactic," or any act that "insinuates itself" into a place "fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance" (p. xix). This process of the individual seizing autonomy, however limited, is referred to as one's "making do" within a system larger than themselves (p. 29). And while the agency afforded to those who are oppressed is central to my work, I believe that the matter-of-factness with which De Certeau describes the tactics of making do belies the risks and barriers experienced by those who would seek to resist or even change the status quo.

⁷⁰ Other than perhaps through the discovery and policing of loopholes. We could easily go on at length here, but it would be quite the digression. If my reader is interested in this line of thought, then I encourage them to keep it in mind when looking at Chapter 5 and the distinction I make between triflers and cheaters. I see the latter as an effective illustration of what I mean here about the political inertness of making do as a tactic.

Food International, n.d.). By attempting to shift the focus of where we get our food away from the end of the supply line on a grocery store shelf, the Slow Food movement aims to reveal and operate against the mechanized, artificial processes through which a large portion of the planet is fed. Unsurprisingly, this organization fancies itself a revolutionary force, complete with a manifesto which articulates a trio of values that should go into all 'slow-certified' cooking (Good, Clean, and Fair). All told, their attempt to frame slowness as a positive would seem to operate against the normative assumptions of our world of speed as domination.

Devotees of this movement would doubtless agree with Parkins and Craig when they write that "the very idea of slow living is provocative [...] a position counter to the dominant value-system of 'the times'" (2006, p. 1). And yet, I nonetheless feel that something is rotten in the state of slow life and it runs right to the movement's roots in slow food and its manifesto. While "a sense of 'slow time' may interrogate the instrumental forms of social time [...] and seek to offer an alternative to speed as the only available temporality", this does not mean that the slow living movement is without oversights (p. 40). In asking how we might slow down our lives, nowhere does the movement ask who is able to ease the pain of acceleration or whose labour enables that corresponding slowness.

It is as Sharma argues: "these intellectual responses and progressive social movements that respond to the problematic pace of life risk reproducing the very social inequalities they rail against" (2014, p. 110). Slow Food International's choice to label sourcing local ingredients and eating a sustainable diet as critical acts fails to rescue any but those with the requisite time and

money from the need for 'faster' food, and the same is true for many other efforts towards a *slow life*.^{71 72 73} Even so, I am not suggesting that any effort to slow down is inherently a bad thing.

As one might observe with the Slow Food movement (or as we will see with the discussion of wholesome games throughout this chapter), the work of building a movement around as multifaceted a concept as slowness is exceedingly intuitive, but this intuitiveness is exactly what allows for the movement to be co-opted and pulled in many different directions. It is how Slow Food and the desire for locally sourced, organic ingredients leads to Whole Foods, Hello Fresh, and the gentrification of nutrition⁷⁴ on the one hand while still pointing out the very real environmental and socio-economic impact of the fast-food industry on the other.

The rest of this chapter explores similar ambivalences that are created through the ways that video game players and designers try to slow things down. I will be touching on concepts like nostalgia, self-care, and wholesomeness as they are discussed by individual actors within game culture with a view to interrogating the (re)generative potential of something like radical slowness. Though this chapter will ultimately conclude on a hopeful note by suggesting that there remains merit to examining the emancipatory potential of tarrying with the status quo, I still arrive at that conclusion by first examining the numerous ways that the desire for a more leisurely way of life can go awry. While I whole-heartedly agree with Parkins and Craig that slowness and slow living are

⁷¹ See Ganszyniec (2019) for a *slow games manifesto* penned by one of Different Tales' founders. He has admitted to being inspired by other slow life movements, most notably Slow Food (Szedlak, 2020).

⁷² For a pair of apparent notable exceptions, I note the slow media movement (Köhler et al, 2010) and Kitchin and Fraser's recent work on slow computing (2020). Though I do not delve into these works more deeply here, they will doubtless play a role in any further work I do in this area.

⁷³ Such ambivalence must equally be extended to play. While I am invested in exploring leisure as a potentially tactical site to bring about reform or revolt, it would be naïve of me to do so without recalling video game play does not occur in a vacuum. It is a luxury that one cannot always afford, whether financially, temporally, or otherwise as well as a practice that is made possible through the exploitation of labour and which has a measurably detrimental impact on our ecological well-being. While a more rigorous engagement with these facts is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I would be remiss to leave them unmentioned altogether.

⁷⁴ See Cohen (2018).

provocative ideas, then, one of the main conclusions that can be drawn from this chapter is that provocative and conservative are not mutually exclusive concepts.

2.4 – Slowness as Comfort: Coziness and Nostalgia Among Patientgamers

When I first began scanning through r/patientgamers, for some evidence of them discussing exhaustion, I came across a number of posts discussing so-called *cozy games*. User WickedWenchOfTheWest describes the concept as “those games where, whenever you fire them up and begin a new adventure, there's that warm, embracing feeling that says, ‘Welcome Home.’ Or, to phrase it another way, they're the ‘comfort foods’ of gaming.” (2018, para. 1). While this term will have bearing on my discussion of *wholesome games* later in this chapter, I want to begin with coziness here to understand how both it and wholesomeness tie to slow game discourse.

While it is clear that the word ‘cozy’ is not entirely synonymous with slowness, both words can be tied to the idea of stepping out of one temporal affect (constant movement and productivity) and into another (consensual stasis and restoration). I am here reminded of Svetlana Boym’s notion of a “time-out-of-time of daydreaming and longing that jeopardizes one’s timetables and work ethic” (2001, p.xix). At the same time, the term ‘cozy’ carries a similar ambivalence to the one Sharma identifies in slowness – just as others⁷⁵ have pointed out that the popularity of minimalist interior design can read as uncomfortably close to a fetishization of poverty, so too would I argue that the celebration of cozy living spaces is a means of normalizing and in fact selling the ongoing housing crisis.⁷⁶ There is a clear family resemblance between these terms as they relate to notions of leisure, rest, and comfort.

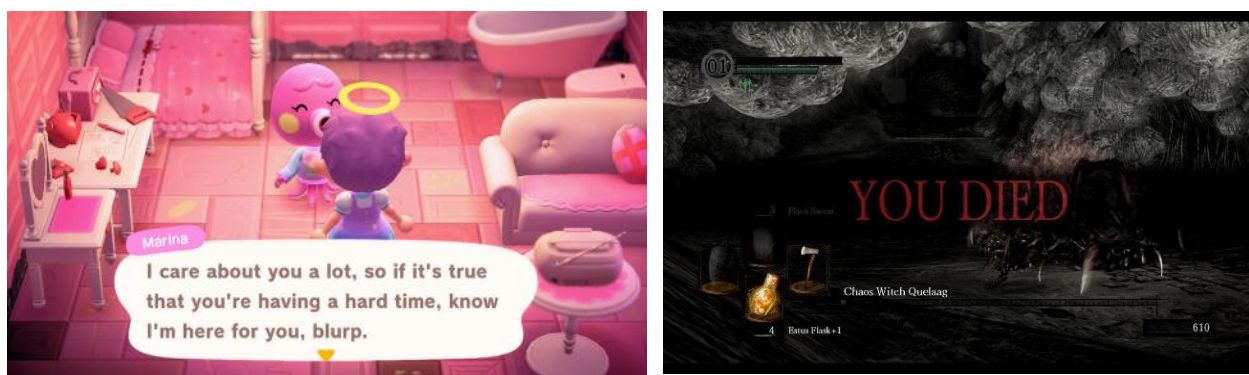
Given these similarities, I began reading these threads on cozy games with a preconceived notion of which games users would bring up for discussion. Specifically, I assumed that whatever

⁷⁵ See Tolentino, 2020

⁷⁶ Emblematized by the Vanlife movement, the practice of buying and refurbishing a van to live in and travel with. Egret (2021) and others have noted the ways that the lifestyle is idealized while for many for whom such choices are far from voluntary, the practice is stigmatized and policed.

games I encountered would subscribe to the design principles contained in Brie Code’s notion of “tend-and-befriend” games, those titles which substitute fight-or-flight logics for ones which drive you to “protect your loved ones, to seek out your allies, and to form new alliances” (2017, para. 8). And while some of these games did make appearances, I was surprised to find that users would highlight a much wider variety of games, many of which one would be hard-pressed to call cozy at first glance.

Alongside predictable titles like the farming/life simulator, *Stardew Valley* (as one player explains, “There’s no real bad guy to fight, you’re not in competition with anyone, and for me, it scratches my gardening itch when it’s winter and can’t be in my actual garden”) to Nintendo’s *Animal Crossing* series (as another player writes, “I have great memories of playing it back in 2001. I was fresh out of high school and didn’t have many responsibilities...”), users listed games like *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware Inc., 2011), *Diablo* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1996), *Goldeneye: 007* (Rare, 1997), or even *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2002), one of *Skyrim*’s predecessors (WickedWenchOfTheWest, 2018) (See Figs. 5 and 6). Given that these games involve varying amounts of demons, monsters, and killing, what are we to make of people calling these cozy games?



Figs. 5 + 6 – Screenshots from *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (left) and *Dark Souls* (right). From the language and colour palette differences alone, one would likely be surprised to learn that both of these games are considered cozy by many.

If we look at the users' accounts of *Stardew Valley* or *Animal Crossing* cited above, it is clear that a game's mechanics and aesthetics can play a role in their being framed as cozy. The fact that both of these examples have 'no real bad guy to fight' seems an intuitive enough reason to feel at ease in a game world and Code's framing of tend-and-befriend clearly applies as well, but what of a first-person shooter like *Goldeneye*? Who does one "tend" to in a game where most character interaction is mediated by guns and explosives? It was at this point that I concluded that the disjoint between tend-and-befriend games and other apparently cozy games is not explainable through game design decisions alone.⁷⁷

Examining the quotes listed above further, we can see that one player's love of *Stardew Valley* has ties to their love of gardening and desire to return to a time when the weather is more permissive of their hobby. For the *Animal Crossing* player, their cozy feelings stem from a fondness for simpler days when they were younger and had fewer obligations, implying that they feel burdened by responsibilities in the present day. Both players find themselves longing to return to a feeling or an activity that they enjoyed in the past and are comforted by the video game as a proxy. If we look to players who have chosen less intuitive games, a similar pattern emerges.

In speaking of *Contra* (Umezaki, 1987) (a notoriously difficult side-scrolling shooter game) in the same thread, one user speaks of "knowing where every enemy is [and] flowing through it on pure instinct and muscle memory." Another writes that *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998) "feels like a second home" to them. Still, I think that the answers we seek are best described by the following sentiment: "for me it's 100% about nostalgia and familiarity. Games where I know what will happen and where most of the secrets are..." The ability to find a game comfortably restful, here, stems from encountering only what one has encountered before, and the

⁷⁷ Though more research would be needed to crystallize this, I found it telling that many of the non-intuitive comfort games were older, more classic titles, while many of the more expected cozy/wholesome games had released in the last few years, suggesting that wholesomeness and nostalgia scratch a similar (the same?) itch.

feelings of security and mastery contained therein. Faced with life's rapid series of uncertainties, players here find comfort - find coziness - in turning away.⁷⁸

Taking a cue from this latter patientgamer, I came to frame these discussions and re-playings of cozy games as exercises in *nostalgia* – that desire which seeks “the repetition of the unrepeatable” (Boym, 2001, p. xvii). This is perhaps most true of players who describe game worlds as ‘second homes’ since the word nostalgia is a combination of the Greek words *nóstos* (homecoming) and *álgos* (pain) (p. 3). The term was first coined in the 17th Century to describe a supposed medical condition that was exhibited in Swiss soldiers who were “torn from the social and geographic environment of [their] childhood and youth” and longing for their homeland (Fuentenebro de Diego and Valiente Ots, 2014, p. 405). The more common sense of the word has moved from its clinical origins into a wider cultural fascination and longing for bygone eras of all sorts, but as Boym and others note, this longing can bring about more nefarious things than fond remembrances.

While the reveries of patientgamers may be relatively benign attempts to soothe their exhaustion, we must recall that they, like all nostalgic thoughts, are “fantasies of the past determined by the needs of the present” which “have a direct impact on the future” (p. xvi). In the context of my concern with the drain of zugzwang and the question of why the revolution has yet to come, nostalgia is an important site of energy expenditure which binds us to an idealized version of the past that poisons our present and that we tend to carry into the future, for better or for worse.

⁷⁸ Though I critique nostalgia below, I cannot help here mounting a light defense of looking backward through Walter Benjamin's figure of the Angel of History, who is turned towards the past and views it as one compounding catastrophe, but is forcefully blown ever-onward by the winds of progress. Though the angel “would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed” they are caught up in both the physical and arguably the social necessity of moving onward (Benjamin, 2007, p. 257). I suppose my point here is that there are many reasons for looking backwards and not all who reminisce do so voluntarily. My interest in this image stems from Odell's discussion of it in *How to do Nothing* (2017).

Here we might say that nostalgia tends to engender celebration of one aspect of something without reflection on its other facets. Consider, for example, the post-9/11 United States and the dominant narrative of a country coming together in a time of crisis⁷⁹ juxtaposed against the numerous accounts of rampant Islamophobia experienced by American citizens and visitors alike during that period and into the present day,⁸⁰ or the place of square dancing as a wholesome tradition in a majority of American states, so earned due in large part to the efforts of white supremacist Henry Ford, who sought to conserve a particular sort of 'culture'.⁸¹ For whom were the "good ol' days" actually good?

In the context of video game culture, Kocurek observes that nostalgia for the arcade "seems to express a longing for an adolescent homosocial space [...] directly tied to notions of socializing boys and 'making men'" (2015, p. 210). Ruberg (2018) extends this analysis to argue that "nostalgia itself is a matter of cultural and socioeconomic privilege that cannot be separated from identity" and which creates a dominant understanding of "not just the game's content but its intended audience as well" (para. 3.9). And as Kelly argues in the context of the rhetoric of the alt-right, this process of translating an idealized past into what she argues they frame as a 'degenerate' present and idealized future can even be accomplished through even a vague "nostalgia for a time that has never existed" (2017, para. 5). While reading through threads on cozy games and reflecting on the age of some of the titles listed, this last detail from Kelly reminded me of gamer nostalgia as experienced by young players, people who are told to idealize a period of gaming history that precedes their lifetime, as if they too must seek to mitigate an exhaustion that is not-yet theirs. At the very least, this served as a reminder that dominant values and assumptions are received rather than recalled.

⁷⁹ See Ramgobin, 2016 for one example among many.

⁸⁰ See Desomd-Harris, 2016 for several accounts.

⁸¹ See Pennachia, 2017. Interestingly the very existence of square dancing before this artificially induced renaissance has its origins in chattel slavery (Jamison, 2003).

Just as we might speak of slowness as *hindrance* in relation to the privilege of owning a powerful gaming PC, we can also see that slowness may be a *luxury* that only those with a certain amount of time and money can afford.⁸² Even among those who can make the requisite expenditures to access this playful coziness, there is a hierarchy of experience that is dictated by the individual's access to free time. As one patientgamer notes, "replayability matters because if it doesn't have long term sustainable enjoyment as part of the recipe, then it feels more like a short lived vacation instead of chilling at home so to speak" (2017). While a trip to a lavish resort is often framed as the height of luxury, the ability to do what one will for longer than an employer-mandated week off is arguably even more ideal and while most patient gamers do not have the resources to perpetually bask in the coziness of their favourite games, this user seems to imply that the strong nostalgic attachments these titles invoke can persist across and even beyond play sessions.

From this discussion, we have established a few things, but chief among them is a sense that while people can find a comforting or cozy slowness anywhere, not all people experience slowness in any one place. I believe that this is one way of framing Sharma's assertion that "slowness is suspect" (2014, p. 111). Indeed, it is not inherently emancipatory - it "does not necessarily change (and certainly does not ameliorate) the ways in which individuals are tangled together in time" (p. 111). That "there is so much invested in rescuing [privileged] bodies" from any oppressive form of slowness is proof enough of this (p. 69). She instead calls for a reframing of time "not as being singularly yours or mine for the taking but as uncompromisingly tethered and collective," (p. 150). And while I share her interest in collectivity for mounting a resistance to the individualistic pursuits of a capitalist society, I am obviously less willing to dispense with slowness as a path to this end

⁸² While I call it a luxury here to hearken back to earlier discussions, based on what follows and the ultimate impossibility of fully removing oneself from the stresses of the present, we might equally say that nostalgia is a *cruel optimism* - "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1).

goal. Even so, I will close this first set of observations on slow gaming discourse and the dual nature of slowness with some healthy ambivalence inspired by Sharma's suspicions. But the question remained: were these play experiences, couched in a cozy, imagined past though they may be, enabling patientgamers to soothe their exhaustion with the present?

While I began my investigation with the belief (one that I still hold) that the patientgamer's resistance to marketing hype and their intrinsic critique of the tech sector mantra that what is newest is best both have the potential to be read as anticapitalist actions, I found that many of the reasons that r/patientgamers uses to justify its existence are surprisingly chained to market logics. Beyond lack of money or time, many cite something in the vein of "developers and especially publishers who rush to release games unfinished with season passes with barely any support the year after release" to explain why waiting for a game to 'get good' makes the patientgamer philosophy appealing. And while there may be an implicit argument here that this has the potential to impact industry pipelines, I am skeptical that this would be the case without an accompanying interrogation of why game-making is such a rushed, inequitable industry in the first place.⁸³

While I now wish to examine other ways that r/patientgamers has helped shape this project and its sense of how slow play is discussed, I want to acknowledge here that altering the timing of a gaming purchase does not change the fact that it is a purchase. In a capitalist context, productivity comes in many forms and being a lotus eater is tolerable as long as you are paying by the petal.⁸⁴

2.5 - The Transactional Nature of Play: Finding Time and Clearing Backlogs

As I have already noted, video games and indeed all leisure activities are a privilege to which we all have varying levels of access. And while money is certainly one of the most important

⁸³ For a more in-depth discussion of labour, game-making, and game play, see Chapter 3.

⁸⁴ Here, as with the Vanlife conversation, I think about the contrasting experiences of loitering discussed by two authors with the same last name. Walter Benjamin's (1928) description of wandering aimlessly through Marseilles while intoxicated on hashish differs considerably from Ruha Benjamin's (2019) account of urban design decisions made to prevent unhoused people from finding comfortable places to rest. There's a much longer analysis here, to be sure, but it will suffice here to keep in mind the question of whose lingering is tolerated and under what conditions.

barriers to entry for video games as a hobby (consider jetmax25 and *Skyrim*), it is important to recall that even those who post to r/patientgamers because they cannot afford to purchase a brand-new game can still generally afford something else (consider jetmax25 and *Fallout: New Vegas*).⁸⁵ In the early stages of my research into the subreddit, I was surprised to learn that it emerged out of a player's limited finances in part because many of the threads that I had found were about a lack of an entirely different sort which is much more viscerally connected to exhaustion – the lack of time. Having laid out the fraught nature of slowness as both a luxury beyond the reach of many and a hindrance from which many struggle to escape, I now wish to examine the anxieties I detected in r/patientgamers discussions around time, backlogs, and what I have taken to calling the transactional nature of play.

User DiscoDingoDoggo started a discussion on r/patientgamers titled “People who work full time: how do you find the time to play the games you want? (Bonus points if you have kids)” in which they write:

Since I've started working M-F/9-5, I find I don't really have a ton of time to game, especially when I'm looking to start newer or longer games. Between working and doing other necessary stuff at home (plus trying to find time to build my nonexistent social life or work out or whatever), I find I don't really have time to play games.

Weekends are definitely a possibility but of course there's always a bunch of other stuff to do on the weekends. I don't even have kids and I feel like I barely have any free time; I had more free time as a grad student.

There's so many games piling up that I want to play but it seems so discouraging knowing that I'll probably never have the time to play them.

Does anyone else feel this way? How do you deal with it?

(2019)

⁸⁵ As much as I think it is important to acknowledge that video games are a privileged pastime, it is equally necessary to understand that there is a difference between living in poverty and being working class. One can be both simultaneously, but the vast majority of people need to work to earn a living and many who live in poverty still arguably have some access to leisure. Though I may generalize at times, this is not a zero-sum game.

The rest of the thread consists of various commiserating replies from users who “learned to be more selective” about which games they play or who “always try to have something going while [they] game. Laundry, something in the slow cooker, an event [they] need to attend at X time” so that the hours are being spent on multiple activities.⁸⁶ In response to the question in the original post, it seems that many others on the patientgamers subreddit feel this way. But what exactly is this feeling?

In another thread by user TheDemonator titled “Gamers above 30: Do you find your ability to game for longer periods of time has lessened as you've aged?”, they write that their “ability to play for many hours just isn't there anymore” (2017). In yet another thread, user srmp writes that they are “becoming an impatient gamer” and asks “What have I become? I miss having the drive and excitement to play a game for hours on end, forgetting about the world!” (2017). All of these players share an anxiety around the relation between video game play and time, whether feeling as though they do not have enough time to play or whether they are no longer able to play for as long as they used to. There is definitely a certain amount of nostalgia at work here, a longing for a time when games were fun and one had the time to play them, but I do not believe that this fully explains why some players feel so discouraged by their shifting relations to play.

Here I believe it is helpful to adopt a consumer’s perspective. Based on the way games are discussed by patientgamers and elsewhere, I do not believe it is controversial to say that video game play is often framed as a transaction. One need only look to the primordial gaming wisdom (more scrutinized now than it was previously) that draws a direct line between the price of a game and its playtime to understand this (Gault, 2018). While other models exist, in general a player spends money up front with the assumption that they will spend leisure time later and in return the video game confers something that the consumer is looking for. The expected return on investment

⁸⁶ I am reminded here of various marketspeak such as “making x work for YOU!” or “doing y GUILT-FREE!” Though I worry it belabours the point, the exhaustion inherent in finding ways to justify one’s leisure time by making it more productive is not lost on me here.

here is necessarily subjective, with even broad notions of ‘fun’, ‘entertainment’, or even something like “gaming capital” meaning different things to different people (Consalvo, 2007, p. 4). As I will discuss below with the concept of the gaming backlog, sometimes the very act of purchasing a game is pleasurable enough that actually playing it may become secondary. Even so, my core conceit here is that video game play is an investment of both one’s money and one’s time. But what does it mean to be invested in what many consider to be a voluntary leisure activity?⁸⁷

What interests me here is one sense of the value players place in *having played a game*, and I assess this by examining how players discuss their *not-playing*, specifically the anxieties and the guilt that emerge from this. For indeed, when I see players who describe “playing three games at once in order to finish all of them more quickly” so that they might move on to the next title, I cannot help thinking of Agamben and the instrumentalization of leisure time (JohnnyEC, 2019). However, for many of these players, their play seems to become work-like even beyond the fact that it is complicit in making our bodies ready for more labour.⁸⁸

In *The Art of Failure*, Juul has no chapters or sections devoted a discussion to time. Despite this, time comes up repeatedly when he discusses *why* failure in games is something we wish to avoid, which unsurprisingly ties to the notion of play as an investment. “To play a game is an emotional gamble,” he writes, “we invest time and self-esteem in the hope that it will pay off” (2013, p. 14). In leisure as in life, time is a finite resource and so when we play games, Juul argues, we are putting that time on the line and betting that we will eventually achieve success. If we do not succeed, then the failure is all the more painful for the amount of time we have invested in trying. Cruelly enough, the only option Juul offers (other than the implicit choice of giving up) is to keep playing.

⁸⁷ Here I also think of the *investment* fans place in being fans, sometimes harassing those with dissenting opinions, as seen with *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED, 2020; Savic, 2020).

⁸⁸ Here I am speaking of the concept of play itself. For a more in-depth conversation around so-called workification, or how game design is producing more work-like gameplay, see Chapter 3.

In describing a particular subset of games that “may not even allow a player to fail,” Juul writes that “failure, in such a case, is rather not-having-succeeded-yet” (p. 79). Similarly, he later argues that “when we begin playing a game with a completable goal, we assume the flaw of being someone who has not completed the game yet” (p. 117). And while he sees an end to this state (“once successful, we will always be a person who has completed the game”), it is this state of not-yet that I want to lift from his analysis (p. 117). If the value that comes from a game emerges in the play, then anyone who has not-yet played a game they purchased is arguably a failure, not just with reference to the video game’s metric for success⁸⁹, but with reference to the larger ‘game’ of spending money and reaping a return. Beyond Agamben’s sense of the role of leisure in relation to labour, then, we see that play itself falls prey to the exhausting logic of efficiency and productivity, that is to say capitalism. I believe this can be best understood if we now look at the concept of the gaming backlog.

Within popular discourse, the term backlog refers to “an accumulation of tasks unperformed or materials not processed” (Merriam-Webster, 2022). In the context of r/patientgamers, and indeed game culture as a whole, one’s backlog generally refers to the games they have purchased but have yet to play and/or complete. However, as is surprisingly often the case, our most common usage of the term backlog is exactly the opposite of what it originally meant. In the 17th Century, the term backlog emerged to describe a literal “log placed at the back of a fire to keep a blaze going and concentrate the heat” and by the 19th Century, it was also employed more figuratively to refer to “something stored up for later use”⁹⁰ (Harper, 2001). Up until at least the 20th Century, then, we may say that the word referred to something that was desirable to hang on to, whether in reserve, or as a vital base from which something could grow and flourish. Why,

⁸⁹ For example, JohnnyEC describes playing “until I saw end credits” as his metric for completion (2019).

⁹⁰ Interesting note for etymology nerds: it is speculated that this more figurative sense of the term could equally stem from the use of “log” in “log-book” (Harper, 2001).

then, does it now refer to something completely different? How has the term backlog come to refer to something that we are meant to minimize instead of something that we wish to maximize?

Based on the feelings we have lifted from patientgamers above, one imagines the player as a clerk with a pile of games on one side of their desk in a *to play* pile and a vague shame and fatigue around how tall this may become as they work to grow their *played* pile. Critically, while we may speculate that gamers play games to have fun, be entertained, or access a form of cultural capital, the contemporary sense of the term backlog presents the idea of reducing one's *to play* pile as an end in itself. Put differently, I am arguing that one driving motivation for play may be to reduce the size of the backlog and with it, the corresponding feelings of guilt and anxiety around being unproductive players or not getting enough value out of their transactions.

At the same time, with the increased popularity of digital over physical video game purchases⁹¹, spending money on a game has never been easier or more abstracted from the idea of currency changing hands. And with large corporate storefronts like Valve's Steam able to have numerous sales over the course of the year, players are only further incentivized to seek out and take advantage of video game deals. The old joke that something is "so cheap you can't afford NOT to buy it" comes to mind.⁹² However, in 2018 the company tried something new that directly addressed the largely tacit understanding that so many players had purchased games only to never play them, the Spring Cleaning event. As described elsewhere, the event was presented as "a way to catch up with your backlog, and earn a new Steam badge in the process, by completing daily tasks with games you already own" (Chalk, 2019).⁹³ Following the apparent success of the first event, it has since become an annual tradition.

⁹¹ Due in no small part to the COVID-19 pandemic, over half of worldwide video game purchases in 2020 have been digital for the first time (Warman, 2020).

⁹² In 2014, Valve released data which showed that 22% of games purchased by Steam users are never played and that, of those copies of games which get played, only 30% are played to completion (Aaron, 2014).

⁹³ We will problematize gamified designs like this in the following chapter. For another critique of gamification and Steam, see Joseph, 2018.

From what we have seen of r/patientgamers' simultaneous endorsement of playing games at one's own pace and its lingering sense that one has too many games to play and not enough time to play them, responses to the Spring Cleaning Event were appropriately mixed. However, even among those who celebrated this opportunity to reduce their backlog, there was speculation around why Valve had organized the event. As one patientgamer wrote, "I'm glad Steam is doing this. Backlog is a real thing and probably cuts into their bottom line. It's the reason I found this sub. I was getting buried in games." What is interesting here and in several other comments on the thread is that many players realize that while keeping a backlog means that many purchased games go unplayed, clearing that backlog can encourage one to make *more purchases*.

This tension between wanting to buy more games and wanting to avoid too large a backlog has also been discussed by Johnson and Luo (2019). Through a series of interviews with players whose purchasing habits consisted either of pre-ordering games or of collecting a backlog of titles generally bought on sale, the authors trace the "commodity fetishism around the purchase and possession of video games" (p. 877). Just as I have argued based on the discourses at work on r/patientgamers, the authors claim that backlog purchases in particular are so prevalent due in part to "the growth in leisure *options* and the reduction of leisure *time* seen in industrialized societies" (p. 878). They also noted participants' "conflicting attitudes towards their ever-growing video game collections, both taking pride in their size and scope, while acknowledging, even if only tacitly, some of the paradoxes" (p. 878). In some sense, the enjoyment of purchasing a game (particularly for a good price) is framed as its own reward.

Stepping back for a moment, I would like to review what my analysis of slow gaming discourse has yielded.⁹⁴ I believe that we have now observed three distinct types of anxieties expressed by users on r/patientgamers:

⁹⁴ While much of my data was collected from r/patientgamers, I believe that I could just as easily have found the same sentiments elsewhere. I also want to be clear that this of course does not represent the sum total of

- A nostalgia for days when one had more time to play and seemed to enjoy games more.
- A sort of guilt around collecting too much of a backlog of games.
- The difficulty of finding time to play as one gets older.

I view these three discursive threads as forming a cycle which holds its occupants in zugzwang. Players in want of comfort, players try to satisfy their nostalgia or rescue their enjoyment of the hobby by buying games. While the act of purchase itself is pleasurable, a backlog of games begins to form which causes players a certain amount of guilt for not getting enough value out of their invested money due to their inability to invest time. Play, then, is framed as a means of reducing one's backlog and this instrumentalization of play, coupled with the necessary instrumentalization of the rest of one's life that comes with reaching adulthood and being of particular class backgrounds, means that one has little time to play. The guilt of the backlog, generally satisfied only by lowering one's *to play* pile, cannot be assuaged all that quickly due to other life commitments and the nostalgia for one's youth returns (if it ever left), along with its corresponding desire to purchase yet another game that is supposed to be 'good' (or even another port or remaster of a game one has already bought and played), and the cycle repeats.

"Your move."

While it is significant that this loop of playing and purchasing games could be lifted from the Reddit threads we have seen so far, the cycle itself is not meant to be taken as a new idea. Video game companies everywhere know this and cater to it appropriately. Capital, after all, finds ways to capitalize. What is most important here is that the transactional nature of play within this discourse, crystallized in the concept of the gaming backlog, speaks to the role that video games have come to occupy in the contemporary moment. From what we have seen, they are framed as consumable media products that are supposed escapes but nonetheless many players tether them

all that is discussed on this slow gaming hub, however these types posts are the most salient to the domain of this dissertation.

to the same draining logics of labour, time, and value that many would seemingly seek to forget when they turn to these virtual worlds.⁹⁵

By paying attention to the ways that play is framed as transactional (whether the currency is money or time), we have also seen that play, contrary to many of its older definitions, can be viewed as an obligation that these players either meet or feel negatively about having *not-yet* met. This is clear whether we look at the release of *Skyrim* and the subsequent founding of r/patientgamers or whether we consider the anxieties that emerge out of accumulating a gaming backlog. Not even those patientgamers who *do* empty their backlog are immune to this set of feelings.

One of the longest and most upvoted posts in the subreddit's history is an account of one player's efforts to empty their backlog, "to finally be free" (Redacted⁹⁶, 2019). After a summer of play and 16 finished games, the user called success "the single worst mistake I have ever made in my fucking life," explaining that the project resulted in "utterly ruining the fun and wasting hundreds of hours of [their] own time. [...] That's not how you're supposed to play a fucking *game*, man" (2019).⁹⁷ They go on:

If you're like me and you tend to be a little obsessive about organizing every aspect of your life, you need to draw the line when it comes to your entertainment, your downtime. Most of you have probably heard that if your hobby becomes a chore, you're doing something wrong. It's the truth, and I learned it the hard way. I don't feel any more accomplished than I did before beating my backlog. Before, I felt overwhelmed with having a list of hundreds of hours worth of content to slog through. Now I feel angry at myself for basically throwing away over 2 months worth of potentially productive energy, for what purpose exactly?

(2019)

⁹⁵ In other words, they both inform and are informed by culture in ways that conserve the status quo.

⁹⁶ While I have opted to cite the names of post authors (but not commentors) because that is easily searchable information, in this instance I have redacted the author's name because the post was deleted. It can be accessed via Wayback Machine, if need-be.

⁹⁷ I am reminded here of Baudrillard's (1996) assertion that "madness begins once a collection is deemed complete" (p. 7).

Here this patientgamer espouses certain implicit values around how one is supposed to play a game and what the proper division should be between one's organized life and one's play in a manner that recalls neoliberal principles of self-management. The onus is on the player-consumer to properly conduct their transactions within the free market of video games. Rather than questioning the origins of their backlog anxiety, then, this user directs their energy elsewhere. Despite stating that they felt 'overwhelmed with hours of content to slog through,' they conclude by wondering why they embarked on this project to begin with and what could have been accomplished with that 'productive' energy instead.

Implicit here and also explicitly expressed by many on the subreddit is that their energy could be more productively expended while still playing games, albeit at different paces, with different reasons, or indeed of different sorts. For every thread I read about backlog anxieties and not finding games fun anymore, I found others arguing that games are meant to be enjoyed and recommending other virtual worlds that might be more resistant to instrumentalization, including those threads of so-called cozy games which I discussed above.⁹⁸ With what remains of this chapter, I wish to follow these recommendations and pivot to another umbrella term which has been used to group up games like *Animal Crossing* or *Stardew Valley*, along with other titles which seem designed to dispense comfort – *wholesome games*.

Just as I argued that coziness shared many family resemblances with slowness due to its emphasis on comfort, rest, and security, so too do I argue that wholesome games may be read as part of the slow game constellation. As I will show, these terms are all (with some notable differences) roughly interchangeable with one another but, as was the case with "cozy", the various contexts in which the "wholesome" epithet is deployed in game culture are worth examining here. When compared to manifestos of slow living or the nostalgic yearning for coziness, wholesome has

⁹⁸ As will be discussed in Chapter 3 and 4, despite the frequency with which these games are recommended, they are some of the most readily instrumentalizable titles in recent memory.

emerged as arguably the most popular term for the specific subset of games which are *designed* with comfort in mind. However, the word wholesome undeniably has certain ideological trappings, the interrogation of which is important for understanding where radical softness and radical slowness depart from the discourses that have been explored thus far. With what remains of this chapter, I would like to examine the politics of the wholesome game with a view to understanding the interventions such titles can make to counter exhaustion as well as the limits to their (re)generative potential.

2.6 - On the Need for Rest and the Politics of Wholesomeness

On February 4, 2019, game developer Matthew Taylor created a Twitter account called Wholesome Games, the purpose of which was to “curate games he personally liked” and which he saw as having emotionally edifying characteristics (Valentine, 2020, para. 1). In short order, the account grew to the point that several of Taylor’s friends joined the project, creating a Discord and other social media hubs to corral what was quickly morphing from a list of niche video games into a full-blown hub for players, makers, and fans of so-called wholesome games. In response to the sudden growth and with it their emerging role as tastemakers for an entire category of video game, Taylor and several colleagues in the community developed a set of criteria for what a game had to do to be wholesome:

- Wholesome games are less violent when they can be (but *Costume Quest* is still wholesome)
- Wholesome games are less stressful when they can be (but *Katamari Damacy* is still wholesome)
- Wholesome games have lower stakes when they can (but *Quench* is still wholesome)
- Wholesome games are uplifting when they can be (but *Spiritfarer* is still wholesome)
- Wholesome games have positive representation of marginalized groups when they can (but *Hamtaro: Ham-Hams Unite* is still wholesome)
- Wholesome games are cute and comforting when they can be (but *Röki* is still wholesome)

(wholesomejames, 2020)⁹⁹

As the account continued to garner followers and this collective of wholesome gamers increased in size, Taylor et al began to organize large-scale events that sought to draw attention to games whose mechanics and aesthetics would seem to clash with the more dominant logics of fight-or-flight AAA titles. This culminated in the announcement and broadcasting of the Wholesome Direct, a 37-minute indie game showcase broadcast live on YouTube, the responses to which are the subject of the latter part of this chapter.¹⁰⁰

Much of the information I provide throughout this chapter has been gleaned exclusively from interviews with the founders of Wholesome Games account and website – Matthew Taylor and James Tillman. The Twitter account itself, along with the rest of their social media presence completely obfuscates the curators themselves, instead focusing solely on games and community events. From Taylor’s first Tweet on the @_wholesomegames account (with an inauspicious 4 likes to this day) to its most recent, the format has remained consistent: brief descriptions of games with links to the developer’s website and several accompanying screenshots (See Fig. 7). Before finding the interviews with Taylor and his collaborators, I often wondered whether this was simply an advertising account and what a game or a development team had to do to get noticed and circulated to the account’s 45,000+ followers. Even now the actual selection process still remains fairly unclear to me beyond an apparent adherence to the admittedly subjective criteria of they believe makes a game ‘wholesome’ (wholesome games are less stressful than what? for whom? what does good representation look like? According to whom? Etc.).

⁹⁹ There is something to be said here about the simultaneous signaling that wholesome games are for audiences that are not necessarily ‘core gamers’ while still relying on specialized knowledge about these six specific games in order to make their definitions clearer.

¹⁰⁰ To be clear, while the account still exists and the Wholesome Directs have continued, the narrative of this chapter as well as the time in which it was written both led to me centering this first event as a climactic event.



Fig. 7 – A screenshot of a typical tweet from the @_wholesomegames account

However, as noted earlier with the example of Henry Ford and square-dancing, I believe it is a mistake to frame wholesomeness as just an aesthetic or even an affect. Instead, I argue that it is a politic, one that holds different meaning not just among individuals, but among larger groups like players, makers, and corporations and across vectors of privilege such as race, gender, and class. What follows, then is an examination of the politics of wholesomeness in game culture, both how the concept is represented and how it is critiqued. I argue that this analysis not only deepens our understanding of what games are for and why people play in the contemporary moment, but also interrogates the emancipatory potential of something like radical softness (and with it, radical slowness), both of which must be vetted at this early stage in the dissertation. To begin, let me tell you a story.

2.6.1 - From Wholesome Beginnings

It's February 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic is still in its infancy with only a handful of countries experiencing the vast majority of the cases. For many, then, the notion that we will all soon be embroiled in a global crisis that will lead to the deaths of (at the time of writing) over 6.14 million people is not even a blip on the radar. It certainly was not for me. February is my birth

month so I was planning to fly back home to Montreal and visit my parents.¹⁰¹ We had made reservations at one of my favourite restaurants and I could not wait to be touching down in my old stomping grounds. Clearly, the health concerns around flying, dining at restaurants, or really going out in public at all, had yet to truly materialize. I remember a cab driver asking me, “So you’re not scared of the virus?” when I told him I was going to the airport. Neither of us were wearing masks yet, of course. Within game culture discourse, people’s main concerns lay in things that hindsight makes seem absurd, including the fact that it had been five months since the last Nintendo Direct.

The Nintendo Directs are a series of video presentations given by the eponymous video game hardware and software company to offer would-be players insight into the next big titles that are in development or about to be released. Since the first Direct in 2011, they have become well-loved media events that garner millions of viewers and droves of reaction videos and articles that are diligently released in the wake of each new presentation. The Directs do not generally have a set schedule; they tend to be announced on an impromptu basis. In February 2020, fans of Nintendo and indeed game culture at large were both devoting countless keystrokes to guesswork and frustration. A Direct would ultimately occur that March, but it would be the last one for some time.

Fast forward to April, and the global awareness of just how severe this whole coronavirus thing might be had grown exponentially. As the pandemic worsened and many people either shifted to working from home or were laid off entirely, the temporality of day-to-day life began to change. Though I am certain someone will one day write about this more diligently and that my sense of things is far from universal, I observed a number of different experiences of time and of exhaustion which were largely based on one’s class. For example, many (particularly bourgeois) families felt the frenzy of rushing to stores to buy up all their toilet paper and hand sanitizer. Others who were suddenly unemployed found themselves with many slow-passing hours to fill with looking for some

¹⁰¹ I also had a dentist appointment since a flight home and an uninsured dental procedure in Canada was cheaper than receiving the same care in Orange County, even with the University of California dental insurance, but that is only sort of relevant.

way to sustain themselves. Perhaps more chillingly, those whose jobs were deemed essential experienced the passing of days at about the same pace, albeit with far more stress and vague commendations from governments and media outlets. Though my perspective has its limitations, I do not believe that it is unfair to say that we were living in a different world than we had been in February.

Once again, I am reminded of Sharma here, this time for her account of the temporal shifts felt during the 2008 financial crisis as relatively unproductive forms of consumption became were implemented and normalized to keep the market afloat:

with gas prices rising and the fear of terrorism still lingering, middle-class Americans were instructed to become temporarily immobile – to stay at home [...] Immobility was carefully elevated in status to meet the otherwise inevitable culture shock of staying at home in a nation where open roads, skies, and waterways are seen as a God-granted freedom. [...] The new undestination, the great American staycation [became] the new American Dream.

(2014, p. 129)

As I write this dissertation, billions of people are in varying states of ‘temporary immobility’ as the COVID-19 pandemic makes any close proximity to others potentially unsafe and stay-at-home orders are implemented (though dubiously enforced) in most of the world’s countries, and certain prevailing narratives have been re-written to encourage consumption. As a result, amidst mass unemployment and repeated calls for governments to offer citizens monetary support, some of the world’s richest people and largest companies continue to make record profits.

More notably for our immediate purposes, however, the World Health Organization specifically recommended video games as a stress-reducing pastime that would also help slow the spread of COVID-19, despite their addition of “gaming disorder” to the list of addictive behaviours only one year prior (Canales, 2020). While it feels like every email I have received since quarantine began wants to remind me that we are living in *unprecedented times*, the malleability of laws and institutions when it comes to serving profit are anything but new. But I digress.

Unsurprisingly, many video games were delayed during this period and, quite soon after the sudden cancellation of the Electronics Entertainment Expo (E3), one of the largest video game conventions in the world, sources indicated that even the online-only Nintendo Direct would not re-emerge for some time (Shankar, 2020). It in this context that the first Wholesome Direct was announced, a showcase of 55 indie¹⁰² games that are variously loaded with uplifting or comforting content. While completely independent from Nintendo Directs, the overall format of the Wholesome Direct was clearly inspired by this longer-standing series of presentations.¹⁰³ The organizers have explicitly cited Nintendo Directs, along with the cancellation of E3, as inspiration – their absence left a void that they sought to “make up for” (wholesomejames, 2020).

The video premiered on YouTube on May 26 and garnered approximately 100,000 views by the end of that week (SocialBlade). Perhaps due to this success, the organizers put together a second, shorter presentation for the winter holidays called the Wholesome Snack and have since worked to make the Wholesome Direct an annual tradition (at least up to the time of writing in early 2022). What is most interesting to me here, however, is not the Direct itself, but rather the conversations it sparked.

2.6.2 - Contending Discourses of Wholesomeness

When the Wholesome Direct first premiered, many took to Twitter to discuss the politics of wholesome games, from which several broad positions emerged, although here I wish to look at three in particular for reasons that I will explain as they are introduced. The first came largely from game makers who sought to problematize the implications of the term wholesome (and with it the would-be genre that the Direct celebrated):

(secretly relieved over this discourse bc i can finally yell how much i hate forced positivity+am extremely leftist & very worried & aware of how ppl could otherwise take something like this & reduce a game

¹⁰² For more on the loaded signifier that is the term “indie” see Parker et al (2017).

¹⁰³ Although according to organizers, the name itself was coined by the community as the idea began to take shape (wholesomejames, 2020).

to its "marketability" + "value" as wholesome or not a la "family values")

(cloutsocks, 2020)

Re 'wholesome' - the opposite of an aesthetic of exploitation and violence is not an aesthetic of softness and giving, it's the design and stories told against the grain of the reduction to uncritical aesthetics.

(hannahnicklin, 2020)

the ire i'm seeing, an ire i share, stems from the branding/scenes surrounding them becoming increasingly reductive and playing to an image that can undermine the power of real kindness in games.

(MaxKriegerVG, 2020)

Interestingly (and perhaps predictably), these three tweets all came from people whose games could be assigned the "wholesome" label by outside observers/players. Their motivations for making this argument, then, are not just to suggest that the term "wholesome" risks concealing or even de-fanging the critical potential of games that center kindness or softness, but probably also at distancing themselves and their work from the curatorial reach of the Wholesome Games team. That artists would reject labels that they have not chosen for themselves makes these takes less surprising, but it remains noteworthy that what would seem to be a positive term is so readily cast aside.

The second position that emerged came from a wider swath of people – here I will quote from a games journalist, a game maker/artist, and the head of an indie studio. The essential argument is that one should not be so heavy-handed in their critique of so-called wholesome games since in many cases these are titles that are made and enjoyed by minoritized players and which do important work to improve one's mental health in ways that more mainstream games may not. In this sense, developing a language around wholesome games is productive since it gives makers and players a shared understanding of how to describe games that emphasize tend-and-befriend mechanics and/or aesthetics. Important to note here is that this position seems not to have emerged in direct response to the critiques of wholesomeness articulated above, instead it seems to engage with more reductive arguments around the place of non-normative designs in game culture:

on the real i think "wholesome" is less about the games themselves than the nourished feeling people get when they finally play games that represent them / explore complex stuff we don't often see / prioritize things that aren't violence [...] like that shit does give me more of a will to live. that's the part that's wholesome: hope that there can be more for us beyond what a boardroom somewhere says we should buy.

(xpatriciah, 2020a)

Genuinely amazed that some people are taking issue with games that are intended to help people chill out and feel good. Also astonished that a free event organised by a small community out of love has people acting like wholesome games are over-saturating the market. 'Wholesome games' are often made by marginalised folks who who (sic) are trying to bring something different, personal and genuine to the table, and these are the people whose work you are calling out as vacuous and fake.

(Wrenegadey, 2020)

Funny how people have decided to dunk on 'wholesome' games, a genre that generally has a lot of developers that are NOT MEN
What a strange and unrelated coincidence
It's oversaturated??? Oh yeah but edgy shootymcshootersons & crappy platformers we defo need more of them

(Vialixia, 2020)

Despite the fact that these posts were not necessarily meant as replies to those who critiqued the wholesome games label above, I have included them here since their very existence offers a helpful reminder of what is at stake in this conversation and for whom the stakes may be higher than others. While I take the above critiques of wholesomeness seriously, there are other reasons that these games are maligned that are far less constructive. Game culture and the games industry are both exceedingly hostile to minoritized voices and the discourse around wholesome games has been no exception.

Finally, in what I read as a synthesis of the previous two perspectives, I came across a number of people (the three cited here are game makers and artists) who were glad that the Wholesome Direct had taken place, but were loath to apply the "wholesome" label to their own work and concerned about the ways that the term might be essentialized by wider audiences:

mainly i am glad that there's a market segment that connects with players that is smaller than all of "indie games". because that was too

large to be particularly useful. it's great marketing, and that's important because i want people to get paid for making their games. but of course, like most successful marketing, it's going to erase a lot of the complexities and interesting tensions within the actual games. probably bad if all you're trying to do is make a wholesome game? but luckily, most games have higher aspirations than that.

(v21, 2020)

I'm glad to see both an interest in the games branded as "wholesome", as well as pushback from creators making those games

It's similar to how any artist has ever reacted to any artistic movement

[...]

I'd never brand my own work as "wholesome", especially since it's become synonym with "twee"; and yet, the fact that there is an interest in games branded as such, gives me a platform from which I can hopefully bring meaningful experiences to people

(FlorianVltmn, 2020)

> excited to see successful cooperation between small studios and developers, especially outside of big industry
> my enthusiasm is cooled by ~comfy~ as a marketing strategy
> cozy as a shorthand for "cute, laid back, easy to consume"
undersells much of what it is applied to

(everestpipkin, 2020)

These responses to the Wholesome Direct do an effective job of capturing both the positive and negative consequences of uniting a set of similar aesthetic and affective design choices under one umbrella term.

In our capitalist society, money is both a measure of one's worth and a necessity for maintaining one's basic living conditions. This, coupled with the neoliberal push towards self-management makes it conceivable that one may render their leisure time productive and profitable. Regardless of whether one intends to do so, then, once a game or another creative work is sent out into the world, it is subject to being marketed at others, whether by the creator of the thing or by another actor who seeks to turn a profit themselves. Within the present system, this is not an inherently bad thing so much as a condition for existence, but it does complicate the relationship

between creation and reception while highlighting the risks and rewards of formally naming something.

In this case, we see that a group of people who were united by their interest in a particular subset of games tried to unite those games, their makers, and their players under one umbrella by curating a particular sense of the term *wholesome games*. From what interviews and other articles I have been able to find, it seems like the heads of this community genuinely want to share these games with a wider audience in the name of broadening who and what are given space in game culture. But as was the case with Slow Food, good faith is not enough to bring about meaningful change – one’s actions must be backed up by clear intentions.¹⁰⁴ As I bring this chapter to a close, I want to use the wholesome games example as a springboard to make certain key theoretical distinctions that will be important in what follows, all of which are grounded in the troubled, but troubling temporality of one who is living as-if the revolution will come (or, I might say, for whom it is not-yet complete).

2.6.3 - A Last Word on Wholesome Politics: Comfort and Rest

I generally agree with all of the tweets that were cited above. But, as noted earlier, it is the third set in particular that is closest to what I am arguing in this chapter. While I believe that the choice to design a “wholesome” game rather than something more conventional can be a subversive, if not decidedly political act, in order for that act to be truly legible as political, the wholesomeness must be more than skin-deep. I do not want my critique to be taken as a form of prejudice here. I share the contention made by Chess and others¹⁰⁵ that games of this ilk are an important piece of game culture despite the fact that they are “often overlooked and dismissed as having no importance or value” (2017, p.5). But, if the extent of a game’s politic is that it seeks to

¹⁰⁴ I note with some degree of optimism that in the time since I originally wrote this chapter and this wholesome discourse played out, the Wholesome Games account has become much more deliberate about addressing the fraught politics of wholesomeness. See metasyntie (2021) as well as the FAQ on the Wholesome Games website

¹⁰⁵ See Consalvo and Paul (2019), for example.

make the player feel comfortable in world where, due to systemic issues, many are not, then it has little more critical potential than any game that creates a cozy nostalgia that maintains the exhausting status quo.¹⁰⁶ The ability for wholesomeness to be used as a veneer for any number of political ends is emblemized by the following tweet¹⁰⁷ in which one of the entities responsible for the most deaths on the planet took to Twitter for a ‘cute’ joke:



Fig. 8 - The world’s largest military power not only recruits more young people to fight and die through its eSports team, but it also has time to be cute on main.

To be clear, then, if a wholesome game does not also discuss the larger social issues that are making you (the player) seek out this experience, or circumstances that are allowing you (the avatar) to have the experience, then it is more of an escape than a critical statement.¹⁰⁸ For example, in one interview Wholesome Games co-founder James Tillman said the following:

“Violence can be wholesome, frankly,” he says. “We see what protesters around the country have done in the past couple of months. I would be the last person to say, ‘Hey, calm down guys, this isn’t wholesome.’ Fighting for good things is wholesome. So we leave a spot for that.”

(Valentine, 2020)

His comment about protesters likely refers to the widespread Black Lives Matter movement in the United States whose long-standing opposition to police violence and racial violence against Black people returned to cultural prominence in May 2020 with the murder of George Floyd by a police officer who alleged that he had passed a counterfeit \$20 bill. In the days since this heinous event,

¹⁰⁶ The ties between political shifts and the rise of wholesome games are discussed in Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020.

¹⁰⁷ For those unaware “UwU” is an emoticon not unlike :) which is meant to depict a stereotypically “cute” face. The U’s represent closed eyes and the w is a little, coy mouth.

¹⁰⁸ The limits of critique through design will be spoken of in greater detail in Chapter 4.

the Wholesome Games Twitter account has made only one post relating to the Black Lives Matter movement and, in case you think that this is an unfair dig, the only usages of the word ‘violence’ in the account’s entire history have been in reference to games not having violence or to the player having to fight “only if you have to” and “terrible creatures from long ago” (@wholesomegames 2020; 2019). Tillman’s claim that violence can be wholesome is well and good, then, but it seems that the actual curatorial scope at Wholesome Games is far more limited.^{109 110}

As a result, while the Wholesome Direct does do good work to bring together people who want to make, sell, and play a particular subset of games, it does so at the cost of essentializing wholesomeness as an unproblematic aesthetic that exists for its own sake, which, as I believe to be the case with radical softness and, by extension, radical slowness, could not be further from the truth.

In Mathis’ own words, one purpose for the “unapologetic vulnerability” that is contained within radical softness is that “Being upfront about what pains us helps us learn our hurt and allows others to know they are not alone [... our pain] becomes less of a terrifying, shapeless cloud and more of a thing that can be tackled, little by little, each day” (2016). And so while the practice of radical softness may begin with individual reflection, there is a clear sense here and throughout their discussion of the concept that it reaches outward to one’s wider communities. Indeed, Mathis herself realized this first-hand when the initial photo piece, which was “heavily linked to [their own] healing process” soon garnered a wider following as it began to resonate with the lived experiences of others (Zulch, 2016). Far from existing for its own sake, then, radical softness is very much grounded in the world and has clear goals like revealing systemic issues through a deliberate

¹⁰⁹ See Brewster 2020. As noted in an earlier footnote, it seems as though such good-faith attempts to hold the Wholesome Games team accountable have led to some good reflection since this chapter was initially written.

¹¹⁰ Despite these improvements, I still believe that Wholesome Games fails to do some of the critical work accomplished by many of the grassroots campaigns led on itch.io whose politics were front and center and which raised money for relevant causes (several of these will be discussed in Chapter 4).

failure to suppress one's emotions (even one's exhaustion) and instead cultivate communities of care and support.

Throughout this chapter, the disparate politics of slowness and like-concepts have necessitated that I choose my wording very carefully. While I clearly see a critical potential in a sort of slowness, it is clear from the preceding analysis that, as Sharma suggests, slowness can be suspect. My repeated use of the term *comfort*, as opposed to something like *rest* is one such example of conceptual tiptoeing. Indeed, to me the former term suggests that one is content with their present and is therefore less inclined to think about their future. If someone is well and truly *comfortable*, then why would they seek revolution? Comfort is a conservative affect, *it is an enemy of change*.¹¹¹ As we will discuss momentarily, though, I do not believe the same is true of *rest*, which I see as a direct attack on exhaustion and which I believe can spring from radical slowness.

Just as Mathis is clearly doing more than celebrating wholesomeness or self-care, I do not wish to echo the Slow Food movement or other Slow Life philosophies which espouse the power of seizing comfort for its own sake without any consideration of who can afford to take their time and who, in turn, has their time taken.¹¹² This is one of the key points of departure between Slow Life movements and the praxis that I am advocating for in this dissertation. Where other slow philosophies succumb to a neoliberal individualism in the idea of *comfort* as well as the myth that anyone can completely remove themselves from the material conditions of late capitalism, radical slowness emphasizes ways of seeking out a temporary *rest* followed by a necessary return to the work of collective organizing and communal care that is emphasized in other frameworks of revolution – back to the *as if*.

¹¹¹ See austin_walker's (2018) critique of hopepunk. In comparison to the violent actions of the alt-right, this left-wing movement couched in comfy values ultimately lacks any direction and therefore amounts to little more than words.

¹¹² In March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic first arrived in North America and quarantine protocols began, millionaire musician and actor Jared Leto made headlines for his tweets expressing shock at the state of the pandemic. The reason for this was that he had been on a silent desert meditation retreat for the last 12 days (Kirkpatrick, 2021).

2.7 – Conclusion: On Restful Exits and Rested Returns

Though it will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, here I am inclined to reflect on the received notion that video games are a form of escape. While this idea is often oversimplified to suggest that all games serve the purpose of temporarily removing ourselves from the travails of everyday life, perhaps the patientgamer's pursuit of comfort is in some sense this desire for an escape from their present circumstances. Under the logics of neoliberalism where everyone has the freedom and the opportunity to be the agent of their own success or failure, the necessarily fleeting nature of such an escape leads the patientgamer to turn inward and as "what have I become" before succumbing to the transactional nature of play and trying to find refuge in another title. In this light, the genre of wholesome games would seem to be tailor-made to assuage such anxieties, but whether this is in the service of comfort or of rest becomes a vital consideration.

Instead of wholly accepting or refuting the claim that games are escapes, here at the end of this chapter I wonder whether the question is actually what one *can* escape through video games and what one *cannot*. While one can doubtless play a video game to experience a thrilling story, to develop connections to virtual characters, to simply turn off their brains for a while, or even to feel like they have control over some small pocket of their lives, these experiences are temporary. All of us, but particularly those who only have limited access to leisure, must eventually return to some version of the material, lived conditions characteristic of the larger games of everyday life. There is no leaving the gamespace until your resources are well and truly depleted.

As such, there is nothing inherently *wrong*, to me, with using a video game as a temporary reprieve from the difficulties of everyday life (even if, in the case of patientgamers, that itself can become a source of anxiety). We all need to check out from time to time, but we have to be able to return and we have to be able to keep doing the work that needs to be done. That may not sound so different from Agamben's sense of labour and leisure, but key here is *what sort of work I am arguing that we should be doing*. Video games in general and even slow games in particular can be useful

venues for rest, but that potential is eliminated if they instead take us away from the work worth doing with the promise of comfort. It is a fine line to ride, and one we will develop further to in time. But first, I want to complete my account of zugzwang and the difficulty of dismantling it by speaking at greater length about this relation between work and play.

Throughout the proceeding chapters, I will continue to peel away the layers of ideas which compose the theory of radical slowness until finally we are left with the thing itself, but solid progress has already been made. This chapter began by unpacking Sharma's sense of how one's experience of time is a matter privilege. Through examples from a tech support forum and a so-called Slow Gaming manifesto, slowness was shown to be a luxury or a hindrance in different contexts. With this in mind, I then explored my findings from combing the Internet for slow gaming discourse. I looked at how any video game can be a nostalgic, cozy object for some players even when said games seem anything but relaxing. Next, I looked to how various players discussed their gaming backlog and the anxieties that emerged from both completing or not completing their *to-play* pile. Finally, I discussed wholesome games as a curated movement that grew out of a desire to unite those games that are *cozy by design*. The Wholesome Direct in particular was a helpful episode to unpack both the power of and limitations to the politics of wholesomeness, both for how the Wholesome Games team discussed their praxis and for how various game makers responded to the event.

In short, before delving more deeply into my own analysis, this chapter has served as an in-depth examination of the various ways that slowness is discussed *by others* in game culture, both in and of itself and through like-concepts such as nostalgia and wholesomeness. With this landscape properly understood and some of the work of unpacking slow game discourse from various theoretical vantage points now complete, I am now ready to move to a more pointed discussion of video games themselves, beginning with an examination of these pieces of software within/as

culture as they specifically relate to the question of labour and leisure in the contemporary moment.

Chapter 3 – Where Leisure and Labour Meet: Games About Work

3.1 – A Working Outline

Just as Chapter 2 served to demonstrate the various ways that slowness is not inherently equal to the task of combatting exhaustion, my objective in this chapter is to do the same for video games by framing them as objects which exist at a fraught intersection between labour and leisure. We have seen shades of this already in Agamben's writing on *menuchah* to describe a slippage between work and play that then helped to characterize Wark's sense of game as an organizing logic for humankind. We were reminded of work and play through the video game backlog and the corresponding guilt and exhaustion experienced by many young-adult video game players who could no longer 'play like they used to.' We even implicitly touched on the interplay between labour and leisure in the Introduction when we described the ways that neoliberal capitalism's emphasis on profits and productivity have left so many so depleted. This is what compels me to explore the critical, (re)generative potential of play in the chapters to come.

Before we get there, though, this chapter will tie these earlier threads on play and/as work to a larger framework which concerns how labour and leisure keep us in zugzwang. While labour is the basic process through which we maintain ourselves, the need to earn a living wage has complicated that process and, in the contemporary, Post-Fordist moment, made it so that work seeps into all aspects of our daily lives, exhausting us. Given that I see leisure as a form of labour, I attribute a similarly draining quality to how we pass our free time, such as it is. To better characterize the sort of exhaustion that emerges from things which are apparently not-work, I look to the concept of *boredom* and show how it has been framed as a site of drudgery and depletion as well as as a potential source of (re)generative, critical potential.

Given my desire that this chapter focuses on the ways that games and leisure can exhaust us rather than spur us onward, I then employ game analysis to conduct close readings of six video games that I argue have been designed around work in several ways, each of which will also be tied

to several theoretical concepts which help explain the place of labour and leisure under the neoliberal, capitalist status quo.

First, I will discuss two realistic simulations of similar forms of labour: *Desert Bus* and *American Truck Simulator*. Although each features a number of design choices that indicate a clear desire for verisimilitude, their reasons for doing so could not be more different. *Desert Bus* was made as a joke that served in part to poke fun at the idea that a game of its nature would exist at all, and the more recent *American Truck Simulator* is an earnest entry in a larger series of simulation games that are loved for their (near) realism. The very existence of these games and the implicit shift in attitude around what games can be about raise interesting questions around long-standing discussions of gamification and its less theorized analogue, workification. I ask whether there is any functional difference between these concepts or whether they are both conversations that emerged (albeit in different ways and with different politics) from the immutable ties between work and play.¹¹³

Next, I will examine two games that bear less direct similarities to one another: *Coffee Talk* tells the story of a barista who is eager to lend a friendly ear while *Papers, Please* puts the player in the role of an immigration officer for a fictional authoritarian state. Despite this stark narrative contrast, reading these games against one another offers valuable insight into the relationship between care and control in video games. Larger claims about the relation between care work and

¹¹³ Though not my focus here, I note that game scholars have spoken about the conflation of labour and leisure from multiple perspectives. There is a long-standing interest in how play has been rendered productive, whether through enlisting players helping to shape the game world (Humphreys, 2005) or through earning a living as a professional e-athlete or Twitch streamer (Taylor, 2006; 2012; 2018), for example. This, in turn, may be tied to Terranova's (2000) description of 'free' labour: the process by which "knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (Terranova, 2000, p. 37). While it may be true that players opt in to such playbour practices, one must not forget that games are generally made in ways that support such post-Fordist, capitalist values. Others have written specifically about those games which put players to work, whether through gameplay that consists simple, repetitive tasks or through a player character whose goals align with performing well in their workplace. Here, casual games such as *Diner Dash* (Fortugno and Zimmerman, 2003), which Chess calls the "urtext of the time management genre," take center stage (2017, p. 66). In a manner that recalls Sharma's discussions of taxi drivers and airline staff, Chess argues that these games are "not about managing your own time but managing another person's" (p. 69).

the work of the State are also made possible here, along with an analysis of the contemporary, Post-Fordist moment which I approach through Weeks' notions of reform and revolution and Deleuze's control society. While the relation between care and control is a broad topic, here I ground the discussion in accounting for how zugzwang came to be, how exhaustion is perpetuated, and the key differences between reform and revolution.

Finally, I look to *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Stardew Valley* as two examples of games which cultivate particularly relaxed rhythms. By discussing how the COVID-19 pandemic led to the former becoming a stand-in for the routines of everyday life and how the latter represents an idyllic escape from corporate life for days filled with repetitive, but 'honest' work, I demonstrate the ways that both games coax the player into a *flow state*. I unpack the concept of flow by examining its origins in psychology and game design and suggest, in the vein of Sharma, that flow can be broadened to account for any experience of time, not just one that is seamless. I then pair this discussion with one on exit and the received wisdom that video games are escapes. I make the case that temporary virtual exits can be restorative and therefore helpful in combatting exhaustion, but still maintain that any game that prioritizes comfort rather than rest cannot be politically generative.

As the approximate midpoint of my dissertation, this chapter represents my attempt to trace the contours of the relationship between work and play from several distinct vantage points which inform both what has come before this chapter and what follows it. It is not an all-encompassing account of this relation, nor is it an account which seeks simply to mourn the fact that labour and leisure are inextricably linked. While Cailliois argues that play is corrupted "when the sharp line dividing [it] from the diffuse and insidious laws of daily life is blurred," it is also something that I have to put my hope into so that I can write *as-if* we are simply *not-yet* free (2001,

p. 43).¹¹⁴ Labour itself is not the source of *zugzwang* - it is rather how labour has been organized under capitalism which produces a lasting exhaustion.

As such, I approach the overlap of labour and games with a healthy criticality, one that acknowledges many of the problems with this relation but also understands that game design is neither the sole culprit of, nor the sole solution to, the role of video games in mounting critical, (re)generative opposition to exhaustion. Even so, given that this chapter is about the various ways that we labour (and might yet labour) at play, I have opted to limit myself to games which I see as largely uninterested in presenting alternatives to the status quo. One of my objectives here is to cap off the ongoing discussion of exactly why revolution is so difficult before moving to games which have tried to articulate alternative modes of being (and the limits to these designs) in Chapter 4 and the critical potential of play that I see in my concept of radical slowness in Chapter 5.

3.2 – Labour and Maintenance, Leisure and Boredom

Here and throughout this dissertation, my understanding of labour emerges primarily out of Arendt, for whom it is the ongoing process of sustaining oneself which “never designates the finished product” (1958, p. 80). “And yet”, she continues, “this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency [...] because life itself depends upon it” (p. 87). Labour, then is characterized as a toilsome process which, while not always productive in a capitalist sense, nonetheless *maintains* life itself. As such, it is also a process without any apparent end.¹¹⁵

I like this definition for the ways it lines up with Agamben’s sense of leisure-as-labour,¹¹⁶ as well as contemporary models of Post-Fordist labour in which the work we do to earn a wage takes

¹¹⁴ After all, the alternative here is to cast myself into nihilism (which does not exactly jibe with my writing hundreds of pages on this subject).

¹¹⁵ As I will discuss below and have alluded to previously, I do not see this as an inherently bad thing. Rather, I see it as aligning Arendt’s sense of labour with my sense of critique as a perpetual project.

¹¹⁶ Here I also think of Chia’s observation that under the “ideology of work” described by many of the thinkers cited in this chapter, “leisure and consumption” are “rewards only deserving of those who perform paid work” (2021, p. 50). While I agree with this statement generally, I note the many ways that leisure itself has been rendered productive, which I suggest makes the system itself care far less about who is deserving of paying to take a break.

on a distinctively affective and immaterial character such that “attitudes themselves are productive” (Weeks, 2011, p. 70-1). Since appearing to love one’s work is often ‘part of the job’, and since one needs their job(s) to survive, the Post-Fordist labourer must constantly be ‘on’ – a draining task on top of the already exhausting quality of working for a living and otherwise maintaining the self. Given all of this, I view labour as *any process that is necessary to one’s survival and/or directed towards one’s well-being*, a definition which encompasses both the domain of work and that of play.

Critical for my understanding of the status quo are the mechanisms through which labour is circulated in ways that reify top-down models of control. Recall my early discussions of zugzwang – institutions do not *labour* in the same toilsome ways all humans must. It is also those who toil the most and who have the most to gain from changing the system who have the least energy to bring that change to fruition.¹¹⁷ At the same time, while I am attempting to argue that a re-framing of leisure and play may allow one to find a (re)generative pause for resisting the exhausting status quo, part of the purpose of this chapter is reconciling this goal with the fact that I consider leisure itself a form of labour, a source of an exhaustion all its own. I have found it theoretically useful to connect the sort of exhaustion we experience through leisure to the term *boredom*.

Within boredom studies, there is a fairly consistent tension between two broad framings of the term, one which speaks to the aims of this chapter and the other to the hopes for this project. The first frames it as an exhausting of the masses that keeps the status quo intact. Majumdar’s

¹¹⁷ I do not wish to suggest here that the working class only toils and that the bourgeoisie only experiences a less toilsome sort of labour. Distinct from the larger concept of exhaustion as I frame it here, being tired at times is, I think, a fundamental part of life, the quality of which allows us to intuit which activities we enjoy as leisurely pastimes and which we find more draining. While the very wealthy may be able to pay to outsource most of life’s less-interesting necessities onto someone else (A compulsion which Arendt argues can be used to explain the origins of slavery) there are doubtless things that cannot be bought and drudgeries that must be borne. Similarly, while the working class and the working poor may need to take on several jobs in order to afford access to the basic staples for survival, Agamben and Crary remind us that (for the moment, at least) allowing workers some measure of leisure is good for business and so even they must be given time to rest. This does not mean that we are anywhere near balancing the scales between labour as it is felt by the rich and the poor, but I do not wish for us to therefore conclude that this is a zero-sum game where one is either wholly above it all or wholly crushed underfoot.

discussion of colonial violence and particularly his notion of “the cruelty of the filing cabinet”¹¹⁸ is an image which beautifully captures this sense of boredom, both for those directly experiencing (or committing) these harmful acts and for outside, often more privileged observers (2017, p. 163).¹¹⁹ For those of us in the latter category, it can be difficult to keep up the energy to remain invested in any one cause, both because we need to work to live and because in due time every atrocity-at-a-distance is simply and wordlessly supplanted by the next and “news ceases to be news” (p. 163).¹²⁰ As for those for who are directly oppressed, Majumdar suggests that they may not have the energy needed to grieve, let alone to seek change and so they are left exhausted and bored, waiting to see what will happen next.

In contrast, there are those who situate boredom in the uninteresting nature of the day-to-day and argue that it is a potential catalyst for generating resistance. For such theorists, it is through “the greyness of experience within everyday life” that we may tap into a revolutionary “desire to see more than is given” (Haladyn and Gardiner, 2017, p. 11).¹²¹ In work that adopts this more optimistic (and arguably more privileged) perspective, the experience of boredom can lead

¹¹⁸ While this obviously has very poignant ties to atrocities committed by States the world over, in the context of this dissertation, it also recalls the fate of the games played by those who seek only to empty their backlog. No meaning or memory is attached to such experiences beyond their lowering of one’s to-play pile.

¹¹⁹ He writes: “My personal experience of the most oppressive legacies of colonialism and the obstacles to postcolonial development had little to do with spectacles of riots, terrorism, genocides, all of which had wreaked havoc at other times and in other places. It had much more to do with the mind-numbing boredom inspired by functional and dysfunctional bureaucracies alike, a thousand trivial details of institutions not working the way they might have been expected to work, even within local parameters. What was much more real for me was not the spectacle of power but the banality of it. Underlying such power was not brutality but apathy...” (p. 163). He also contrasts the “philosophically and aesthetically elevated” state of “ennui” in 19th Century European literature with the more “materially grounded” sense of “boredom” here (p. 161).

¹²⁰ This recalls Chang’s (2019) note on environmental catastrophe and the problem feeling beyond reproach. At the time of writing, I cannot help being reminded of the murder of George Floyd, or the seemingly endless stream of violence enacted by various arms of the State both within and beyond the years of the Trump administration in the United States, or indeed the number of people catching and dying of COVID-19 on a regular basis. Once more the wheel turns, indeed.

¹²¹ Scholars who frame boredom in this way look to work of Walter Benjamin, among others. “If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation,” Benjamin writes, “boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation” (1968, p. 91). For him, when one truly has nothing to do, their capacity to find something worth doing is at its most pronounced – “boredom is the threshold of great deeds” (1999, p. 105). Some boredom scholars who read Benjamin in this way interpret this to suggest that “the most historically efficacious of these possibilities must, ultimately, involve enhanced human solidarity and forms of collective agency” (Haladyn and Gardiner, 2017, p. 11).

one to feel detached from the flow of normative time in (re)generative ways that prompt one to imagine, if not enact, alternative modes of being. In this context, the neoliberal capitalist fear of idleness or unproductivity stems not only from what “we might do” with more nonwork time but “what we might become” if we can recognize the harmful mechanisms of *zugzwang* for what they are (Weeks, 2011, p. 170). It is precisely *because* boredom poses so great a threat that we are given as many stimuli as possible (work, media, etc.) in order to steer us away from a more totalizing and, I would add, restful idleness.

As noted above, I believe that both senses of boredom are important to this dissertation. I read the former as a lesson in how leisure effectively pushes us towards comfort, or perhaps *lowers our threshold* for what is *comfortable*,¹²² by pitting it as the only alternative to despairing at the uninterrupted stream of bad news which we saw glimpses of in the Introduction.¹²³ Another way of framing this sense of the term would be to say that while labour *exhausts* us, leisure *keeps us exhausted* by encouraging us to spend our energy in comfortable ways. Meanwhile, the latter sense of boredom suggests that there may be certain things that we should actively seek to become bored of, such as the same exhausting status quo that drives so many towards comfort and away from revolution. Boredom is conceptually useful here because it allows us to see precisely how leisure can both perpetuate and threaten *zugzwang*.

In sum, leisure is a form of labour, a form of self-maintenance that is necessary to neoliberal capitalism insofar as we need some reprieve from the more drudgerous forms of labour. It is nonetheless clear that some have easier and/or longer access to leisure than others. Boredom is a

¹²² We might equally say “normal” or “expected” here. Or, in an inversion of Boltanski’s sense of critique, “acceptable.”

¹²³ On Twitter, they call it *doomscrolling* for a reason. Here we may equally think of the exhausting impossibility of being an “ethical” consumer. Beyond the fact that many more “mindful” brands are also more expensive, the very nature of capitalism is such that every successful business, from banks to grocery stores, is built on maximizing profits through exploitation of one or more labour forces. One can turn on the news and see that Wal-Mart has recently done something terrible and then resolve to take their business elsewhere, but it is only a matter of time before shopping at Target instead is also revealed to have been an exercise in supporting a less-than-caring corporation.

specific sort of by-product of leisure which appears to keep us wedged between comfort and exhaustion such that the energy for revolt remains out of mind or out of reach. At the same time, if left unchecked¹²⁴ the dissatisfaction produced by boredom is said to have the potential to spur on the minds, and perhaps the bodies, of those who are being worked to death towards wondering whether this is really all there is, a possibility I take seriously given my ‘as-if’ hope for radical slowness and (re)generative play.

Devotees of our second, more galvanizing sense of boredom can look forward to Chapters 4 and 5 and the discussion of game design and game play as vehicles for radical slowness and (re)generation. For the moment, though, we will be more concerned with games as they are productive of maintaining the status quo. In this way, Chapter 3 closes the thread that began in Chapter 2 of accounting for precisely *why the work of change is so difficult* and why even well-intentioned actors may fall short of their goal or mishandle their message. To begin, I would like to discuss two games which are very consciously about depicting realistic work environments and activities, albeit for notably differing ends.

3.3 – S(t)imulating Labour: *Desert Bus* and *Truck Simulator*

3.3.1 – Finding What Drives You

Desert Bus is one of several games that make up a larger anthology which was supposed to be released for the *Sega CD* circa 1995 called *Penn & Teller’s Smoke and Mirrors*. Though the game was complete and several reviews were published, the slated publisher, Absolute Entertainment, went out of business before the game could be released. The game only entered the public eye years later once a copy of its ROM was circulated online. It quickly drew infamy for its eclectic touches and thwarting of game design convention. In *Desert Bus*, the player takes up the role of a bus driver whose route is a non-stop trip from Tuscon, Arizona to Las Vegas Nevada in real time. Given that

¹²⁴ Here we might say unsublimated in the sense meant by Freud. For him, sublimation refers to the process by which one channels their instincts and frustrations into “pleasure from the sources of psychical and intellectual work” (1930, p. 10).

the bus has a maximum speed of 45 mph, the trip takes approximately 8 hours and there is no way to pause the game. The desert road that players must traverse is perfectly straight and virtually featureless (See Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 A typical Desert Bus screenshot. The fact that there is a tree on screen makes this particular image more interesting than an average moment of gameplay.

An insect might splat against the windshield and the player may roll by the occasional piece of desert flora, but there is no traffic or any other hazards that must be avoided during the trip. The only thing preventing a player from taping down the accelerator button and leaving the game running unattended is that the bus will gradually shift to the right at all times. If it ever goes too far off the road, then it breaks down and must be towed back to Tuscon (also in real time) before the player can start again. Should the player manage to make it to Las Vegas, they are awarded one point and asked if they would like to turn around and do some ‘overtime’ for the chance at another point, or whether they would like to quit.

In a short video that plays before the game (one of the major draws of the Sega-CD was the potential for full-motion video), Penn Jillette (of Penn and Teller fame) explains that *Desert Bus* represents “the first in our line of what we like to call Verisimulators, games stupefyingly like reality.” As opposed to other simulators, this game promises to prepare the player for “the real world” and show them “what life is really like.” Elsewhere¹²⁵ Jillette has commented that the game

¹²⁵ See Cifaldi, 2006 [Only accessible via Wayback Machine]

originated as a dig against the moral panic about violence in video games of the early 1990's made infamous by figures like Jack Thompson and Janet Reno. Rather than simulating any high-octane flights of fancy, the opening video explains that the operating philosophy of *Desert Bus* was to create "an experience truly similar to real life" which acknowledged that "sometimes life is truly grim." While realism is still a standard that many games seem to strive for, the idea of a title that aimed to be a (mostly) faithful simulation of an actual, unglamorous day job was deployed here as a clever gag.

Desert Bus stands as an effective example of both senses of boredom as they were framed above. On the one hand, the game is utterly mind-numbing to play and some details like the bus being completely devoid of other passengers or the sardonic 'points' system are intentionally cruel design choices. Even so, once the game gained wider notoriety this uncompromising boredom was used by a particular group of players as a space of innovation.

Since leaking online, *Desert Bus* has garnered a cult following (although not one which leads many to actually *play* it), in part due to an annual "Desert Bus For Hope" event, in which a group of gaming personalities play the game together over the course of several days while raising money for charity. Here the game's commitment to hyper-realism stands in contrast to what a game "should" be (i.e. fun, well-paced, etc). However, unlike the real long-haul bus driver, the player can ostensibly quit whenever they want – a feature that the Desert Bus For Hope marathon revels in eliminating. One might therefore critique this fundraiser for the way that it renders a relatively accurate depiction of a career held by many into a humorous spectacle, although it is still an example of boredom breeding novelty. As my next example shows, in the years that followed *Desert Bus'* design (since it was never released), hyper-realism has seldom been played for laughs.

Since the release of *Euro Truck Simulator* in 2008, SCS Software's *Truck Simulator* series has garnered a considerable following¹²⁶ and spawned several sequels, with the most recent release, *American Truck Simulator*,¹²⁷ first launching in 2016 and continuing to receive support and downloadable content at the time of writing (five years later). As one might expect, gameplay consists of using one's truck to deliver various types of cargo from one city to another. Upon successful completion of a delivery, players are awarded with money and experience points which may be used to customize or improve the performance of one's truck. In *American Truck Simulator*, there is also the ability to start one's own shipping company and acquire more trucks and drivers to produce a small business empire.

When all is said and done, however, the bulk of the gameplay is driving from one city to another along virtual approximations of real highways and cities (See Fig. 10).



Fig. 10 - A screenshot from the inside of a cab in *American Truck Simulator*. Players can also play in third person.

While some highways have guard rails, the player has much more freedom of movement than in *Desert Bus*. There is a GPS to follow, but one is free to map out their own route from point A to point B. Should one lose interest in playing along with the game as intended (as I admit I often

¹²⁶ Although I skip ahead in time considerably, I note that there are certainly games of this sort that are more contemporary with *Desert Bus* including *Truckin* (1983) on intellivision or *Crosscountry Canada* (1986) on DOS. Unsurprisingly, these earlier titles do not have the same vibrant community as my chosen example.

¹²⁷ Unless otherwise stated, any information I provide about the series stems from my experience playing this instalment. I am not as familiar with other entries in the series. My reason for picking this title over others stemmed from the simple fact that the California highways might prove familiar despite my not having a driver's license (they did not).

did), they are free to veer off the road, ram into other cars, or variously break other traffic laws. Even so, there is very little feedback from the game other than a monetary fine and the overall condition of one's truck deteriorating over time until it breaks down. Unlike games such as the *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008) or *Burnout 3: Takedown* (Criterion Games, 2004)¹²⁸ where violent crashes and player characters flying out of vehicles with ragdoll physics are standard practice, the *Truck Simulator* series, like *Desert Bus*, does not reward reckless driving (much to my chagrin). The money and experience points that are awarded for each completed job, while far less cruel than *Desert Bus*' points system, further cement the fact that the style of play which is rewarded is that which leads to a job well done.

Despite these similarities, it is clear that *Truck Simulator* is trying much more consciously to be a game that people will enjoy. For all its realism, the virtual trucker (unlike the virtual bus driver) can pause the game for as long as they wish. Instead of there being some malfunction which causes one's truck to veer towards the side of the road, the player's truck has cruise control. While some aspects of the game suggest that experience is its own reward, the player is nonetheless able to spend points to 'level up' over time which allows them to craft a perfectly bespoke rig.¹²⁹ Perhaps most mercifully of all, the distances between cities are not set at a 1:1 scale as in *Desert Bus* and the player can choose between deliveries of different lengths.¹³⁰ Although these choices may prevent SCS Software from becoming disciples of Penn and Teller's school of Verisimulation, the trade-off is that the *Truck Simulator* games have garnered a substantial community of players who approach them as anything but an ironic play experience.

¹²⁸ See Ruberg 2019 on crashes and queer failure.

¹²⁹ Some players even making replicas of trucks that hold sentimental value – the trucks that were used in a family business in years gone by, etc.

¹³⁰ While exact numbers can be difficult to come by, most estimates that I have found from players suggest that maps scale at a rate of 1:3 in cities and 1:19 on freeways. Time also appears to speed up or slow down depending on whether the player is driving or idling. The way time works in these games is mysterious and fascinating.

When I first began researching the *Truck Simulator* games, I was already familiar with the wider genre of hyper-realistic simulation games and the die-hard players that these games can attract. In particular, I had seen many photos of gaming set-ups, so called ‘battlestations,’ from fans of the *Microsoft Flight Simulator* series.¹³¹ I had been amazed at the lengths that players would go to deepen their immersion, sometimes going as far as faithfully recreating the insides of airplane cockpits to extend the simulation out of the machine and into their homes (See Fig. 11).¹³² I wondered whether this desire to make their play feel more like the real thing was a significant example of play being made to be more like work, but that assertion felt partly weakened by the fact that, for many, flying over cities at 30,000 feet was not an everyday occurrence. As such, I had thought, perhaps the desire to faithfully re-create the experience of piloting a Boeing 747 could be more attributable to the fantasy of flight than of the encroachment of labour and its logics into video game play.



Fig. 11 - An impressive Flight Simulator battlestation.

Naturally, then, I was curious whether *Truck Simulator* players were similarly passionate about modifying their home offices to feel more like a truck cab, or whether more familiar sights like roads, cars, and the horizon would not excite the same desire for lavish battlestations. Once I

¹³¹ For more on battlestations, see Taylor, 2022.

¹³² Here again I am reminded of the connections between privilege, free time, and access to surplus leisure and capital.

began looking through hubs for the game's fan communities, I was not left wondering for long.¹³³ While I did not come across anything quite so complex as the replica airplane cockpit pictured above, there was no shortage of players who wanted to share their gaming set-ups that were tuned for maximum realism (See Fig. 12).



Fig. 12- A Truck Simulator battlestation

As one might expect, by investing a significant amount of time and money into acquiring extra monitors and other gaming peripherals, some die-hard players aim to get as close to the trucking experience as possible without leaving the comfort of their homes. What was most surprising, however, was that some players took this desire for immersion a step further.

During my search through /r/trucksim for examples of battlestations and a broader sense of the community's values and mannerisms, I was shocked at how many of the all-time top posts were of players who had actually gotten a job as a truck driver. While folk accounts of someone choosing their career in part based on positive gaming experiences may not be unheard of, to see so many examples of this phenomenon 'in the wild' is clearly significant. While searching for examples of games that were realistic simulations of work, I had stumbled into a community of players for whom getting the job itself was a plausible and sometimes aspirational goal. While using video

¹³³ While less exhaustive, my approach here was effectively the same as that of my work on /r/patientgamers. I would estimate I consulted 20-30 salient threads on /r/trucksim.

games as an explicit means to recruit for jobs is a tactic that is largely monopolized by the military,¹³⁴ the fact remains that a number of *Truck Simulator* players have made the jump from leisurely pastime to salaried profession.

In searching for virtual truckers' battlestations, I also came across a number of images from actual long-haul truck drivers who were sharing the gaming setups they had built in their truck cabs (See Fig. 15). These pictures were shared across a wide variety of gaming websites and interest groups, and none were explicitly tied to the *Truck Simulator* series, however I cannot help feeling that all of these phenomena are connected. I am reminded of how (in the United States, at least¹³⁵) 'truck driver' is one of the most common and arguably most relied upon jobs that exist and how, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this labour is made more visible while those who undertake the labour are nonetheless invisibilized and abstracted by the tracking number and contact-free delivery.¹³⁶

Recalling Agamben, I ask whether the conversion of one's truck cab into a space of leisure is something to be celebrated or whether it is a means of accessing the rest necessary to be able to do more work (or, in fact, whether it is both). Indeed, I find it difficult to separate such a practice from De Certeau's making do, although here I read that somewhat pessimistically. While this truck driver can unwind at the end of the day by playing games and sleeping in their cab, it strikes me that they never wholly 'clock out' of the workplace and that they still wake up the next day and get right back to driving. For Arendt, in an ideal world, the individual who toils to maintain their existence is rewarded with that same existence and all that it has to offer. However, as she notes, we do not live in an ideal world:

¹³⁴ See *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003) or, more glaringly, *America's Army* (United States Army, 2002).

¹³⁵ See Bui, 2015

¹³⁶ In what is likely an attempt to simplify development, the player does not even have the ability to exit their vehicle and walk around, nor do any of the other cars and trucks one passes on the road appear to have people behind the wheel. Like *Desert Bus*, this is a world with no human beings, only four wheels and the open road.

Whatever throws this cycle out of balance – poverty and misery where exhaustion is followed by a wretchedness instead of regeneration or great riches and an entirely effortless life where boredom takes the place of exhaustion and where the mills of necessity, of consumption and digestion, grind an impotent human body mercilessly and barrenly to death – ruins the elemental happiness that comes from being alive.

(p. 108)

This dystopic characterization of labour without reciprocal happiness or exhaustion without regeneration clearly resonates with the state of *zugzwang*. Despite receiving a salary, the truck driver who makes their workspace more livable seems more akin to those who live out of their vans by necessity than the wealthy influencers who do so by choice. This juxtaposition of the gamer who plays as a trucker and the trucker who plays games makes me wonder whether someday this cycle will be completed and whether a truck driver who plays games in their spare time will become a full time Twitch streamer or join an eSports team. But I digress...¹³⁷



Fig. 13 - An image shared by what we might call a truck simulator (even if they do not play *Truck Simulator*)?

I do not wish to suggest that fans of the *Truck Simulator* series are driven by verisimilitude alone,¹³⁸ nor am I saying that the series is an indoctrination machine that serves to get more people

¹³⁷ See Kelty (2005) on recursive publics.

¹³⁸ Indeed some of the most popular posts on the *TruckSim* subreddit are of over-the-top physics glitches. See BaptizedBison (2021) or MalimbagerzPH (2022) for examples of this.

into meeting the demand for truck drivers. Alongside posts on the TruckSim subreddit about players becoming drivers themselves, there are others which draw the stark distinction between playing a game and taking on a “miserable job” in real life (SashaAMoped, 2021). Rather, I am asking what it means that a game like *American Truck Simulator* which, some notable differences aside, is quite similar to a game as cynical as *Desert Bus* has garnered such a following. While the *Truck Simulator* player does not have to spend eight real hours on the road, many enamored players spend even more in-game time than this across multiple play sessions and some go as far as to become truck drivers as a means to earn a living. The twin phenomena of the homemade trucking battlestations and actual truck cabs turned into homes away from home only further emblemize the comingling of work and play.

3.3.2 – *The Blur “-ification” of Work and Play*

For all that the *Truck Simulator* series endeavors to be a bit less of a deliberately ‘bleak’ rendition of reality than *Desert Bus*, both are nonetheless games which transparently simulate work in a manner that recalls Rauch’s essays on *workification*, what he perceives as a “work-centric attitude” which has co-opted the design of many contemporary games (2016, para. 5). He explains, “the manner that we interact with video game content has grown increasingly focused around workplace-like ideals of maximizing productivity and efficiency” such as the implementation of achievements or the “unending stream of small, measurable tasks” which Rauch argues are “all doled out with the moment-to-moment orchestration of an Amazon warehouse puller” (para. 7). One thing that interests me here is how many of these design conventions have simultaneously been critiqued for the part they play in workification’s more well-known opposite and counterpart, gamification.

As Fuchs et al note, gamification is a concept that exists largely within the domain of “marketing gurus and designers” to refer to “the implementation of game features into the companies’ products and services” as well as their very labour models (2014, p. 8). While well-

meaning researchers¹³⁹ have lauded the potential of gamification’s potential to mobilize “gamers [to] use their problem-solving skills not only to solve puzzles within a digital game but also to approach social and political issues in the real world,” gamification practices more often reduce “playing to a stimulus-response experience” with a view to maximizing profits and “exploiting consumers” than to saving the world (p. 10). While gamification has seen success in projects like the citizen science protein puzzle game *Foldit* (University of Washington Center for Game Science, 2008), there are so many other stories of game logics being used to solicit employees to work harder for little to no material gain, from GameStop running an in-house TikTok competition whose prize was more hours of work¹⁴⁰ to Amazon creating an entire system of virtual points which can be spent on digital pets and the means to care for them.¹⁴¹

This is perhaps what Fuchs et al mean when they write that “gamification ‘works’ only in the eyes of those who have been inventing and promoting it in the first place” (p. 10).¹⁴² Given its uncritical and distinctly neoliberal valorization of productivity and progress, every positive example of using game logics to incentivize work (whether theorized by well-intentioned design specialists or emblemized in projects like *Foldit*) is completely compatible with the world in which GameStop, Amazon, and other companies employ these same logics to exploit their workforces – only the vaguest sense of the ends actually matters for justifying the means.

And so once again we find ourselves in the domain of Adorno, Horkheimer, and the numbing effects of the Culture Industry or, perhaps more accurately, we find ourselves constantly being pulled into what Schüll (2012) calls the “machine zone,” a state in which “you’re with the

¹³⁹ See McGonigal (2010). This is a sentiment which, though I am very critical of McGonigal’s argument, I am aware bears a striking resemblance to my own argument. The key difference, I think, may be understood through Weeks’ distinction between reform and revolution, which is discussed below. I do not want to use games as a way of getting better at hegemony, I want us to get better at failing it in ways which minimize the harm done to us and maximize the harm done to the system itself.

¹⁴⁰ See Kastrenakes (2020).

¹⁴¹ See Martineau and Di Stefano (2021) for an account of this particular gem.

¹⁴² Here I am reminded of many of the rhetorics around cryptocurrency and the metaverse (and indeed any other pyramid scheme). Those who have a vested interest in an idea will of course want to convey to others that they too should have a vested interest in said idea, lest interest peter out altogether.

machine and that's all you're with" (p. 2). Given the rhetorics of the managerial literature around gamification and of Rauch's design-centric challenges to workification, however, I wonder if one can ever be without the machine. Attempting to conceptually break off one sense of "progress" from the larger whole of the thing, neoliberal trappings and all, is a reminder that, while developing ways of making do within the present system is frequently possible, imagining ways to dismantle that system and conceive of another can feel very, very difficult.

Indeed, while Rauch seems to speak of workification as an emergent phenomenon ('many games *have begun* to feel more like work than play'), many of the design choices that he highlights including achievements or short, repetitive tasks are present in the gamification playbook as well. At the same time, gamification has been touted as a bold, new managerial strategy and yet Rauch is able to liken achievements for play-time to the tradition of "pocket watches" being given out by businesses "as a reward for spending a long time at a company (2016, para. 8). In other words, what Rauch designates as logics of workification (i.e. work being injected into games) and attributes to primordial labour logics is also what practitioners of gamification (i.e. games being injected into work) attribute to games.

Despite the fact that the air of novelty permeates both Rauch's writing and that of many gamification devotees, I argue that these practices have existed for ages because these are all part of a long-standing process. They are, in fact, mutually constitutive manifestations of the same process, what Wark calls gamespace and what Arendt or Agamben might simply call the social ubiquity of labour. Both processes work towards the same goals because both are informed by the same

hegemonic ideals of productivity and efficiency or, simply, of compelling people to do specific things (i.e. compliance).^{143 144}

Of course, this is not to say that the effects of workification and gamification are necessarily equivalent. As noted above, should the Amazon worker be plied into working harder to keep a virtual penguin alive, this seems to be a more intuitively dire state of affairs than someone clocking out of work, coming home, and driving a virtual truck. Even so, both workification and gamification serve to perpetuate the exhausting status quo by keeping one's mind on a particular type of work for a particular set of ends. A question we will need to address in the following chapter is how these relations may change (and how they may not) if game designers replace dominant models of progress with other ends.

Until then, this first pair of games has shown the blur between labour and leisure through a discussion of two glamourless simulations of everyday life. Whereas *Desert Bus* goes the route of unapologetic hyper-realism for comedic and critical effect, the *Truck Simulator* games take some creative license while putting players in the driver's seat. Even so, it is striking to me that a game that was meant as a joke in the 1990's bears many similarities to a series (if not an entire genre) of well-loved games in the contemporary moment. This arguably speaks not only to a shifting perception of what labour looks like, but of what video games can be about. The twin concepts of gamification and workification have been helpful to begin unpacking these sociotechnical changes,

¹⁴³ Here I am reminded of Weeks (2011) and her updating Arendt's sense of labour with the observation that our current "social system" ensures "that working is the only way that most of us can meet our basic needs" (2011, p. 7). The necessary maintenance of life that was put forth by Arendt still falls under the purview of contemporary labour, however Weeks offers "the wage" as a mediator between one's labour and their "access" to basic necessities like "food, clothing and shelter" (p. 6). The nature of labour today is such that, for the vast majority of the population, regardless of what shape one's labour takes, it is (i) most often done in service of another entity (an individual, a corporation, a nation, etc.) and (ii) earns one only the capital necessary to sustain one's own existence. The Post-Fordist model, which combines Fordism's drive for "a lifetime of compliance with work discipline" with new demands for "flexibility," "adaptability," "continual reinvention," and "commitment," is part in parcel with this connection between labour and control (p. 70-1). Commitment in particular is often measured in terms of time which, for me, recalls Juul's focus on failure and the investment of time in *The Art of Failure*.

¹⁴⁴ A version of this sentiment will be returned to in the following chapter when we discuss the limits game design as an anti-hegemonic practice.

but I would now like to move to discussing labour in games through another pair of concepts, those of care and control, the relation between which will helpfully complicate the work of playing in ways that are productive of lasting and meaningful change.

3.4 – Fantasies of Care and Control: *Coffee Talk and Papers, Please*

While an exact definition of care is elusive at best, I suggest that it is both apt and expedient for our purposes to state that it refers to some form of *investment* into someone or something. Given this, care is an important concept through which to consider the relations between video games, labour, and leisure. From what we have seen of the great lengths to which *Truck* or *Flight Simulator* players have gone to create as immersive a play environment as possible, for example, few would deny that these players ‘care’ a great deal about the games they play. Similarly, while the design of *Desert Bus* seems intent on antagonizing the player as much as possible, a group of players have leaned into that to create an annual charity drive which emblemizes care of another sort. Here, however, I want to begin with a game that is *about* care and the work it entails. Exactly what I mean by this bears some explanation.

For instance, one might suggest that care ought, in its widest sense, to apply to all video game play since the choice to even play at all implies some sense of investment, interest, or care. Indeed, this is in line with our prior discussion of Juul and failure as indeed it fits with his earlier definition of game in *half-real* (2005) which asserts that “the player feels attached to the outcome” of anything we call game which therefore leads them to exert “effort in order to influence the outcome” (p. 36). While Juul’s definition will be returned to later in this section, this is not what I mean by a game being *about* care. Given my focus on zugzwang as a state grounded in a lack of energy, I do not find it useful to suggest anything we do or engage with is something we care about in this context. While I may be interested in reheating some day-old pizza because I am hungry, I do not approach this activity with same attention to detail as I might cooking for my partner on a lazy Sunday.

In the same sense, I think that an important facet to the experience of exhaustion is that one does not have the time or energy to care about everything, including many things which impact our daily lives. Recalling Majumdar's sense of boredom, this may be as mundane as not caring that there is a pile of dirty laundry on one's bed or as global as not having the energy to care about State passivity in the face of climate change. Part of my interest in radical slowness stems from restoring the energy necessary to care about those things which matter most while also giving us a critical vernacular for helping to organize around what those things are.

Instead, what I mean when I suggest that particular games are *about* care is that care itself is centered as a core mechanic or as the primary subject matter of the narrative. These are games which, beyond having characters or situations which the player cares about as a consumer of media, are designed around situations in which the player character interacts with the world around them through the labour of care and indeed care work itself. Perhaps this can best be explained by moving on to an example.

3.4.1 – Happiness is a Warm Mug: Care Work in Coffee Talk

Coffee Talk is a visual novel game developed by Toge Productions. In it, players take on the role of an owner of a café in a fictionalized version of Seattle where humans co-exist with orcs, vampires, elves, and other high-fantasy races. Gameplay consists of players chatting with their patrons, becoming acquainted with their troubles, and brewing them various beverages. At certain points in the game, the player's choice of drink or their ability to remember an order from a previous evening alters the storylines of specific characters in various ways, from one human patron succeeding in finishing her novel to a werewolf being able to keep his feral impulses under control on the night of a full moon. Unlike other visual novels, the player never chooses lines of dialogue for their avatar, their only responsibility is to make drinks while the player character joins scripted exchanges between the café's patrons (See Fig. 14). Beyond clicking through dialogue and making beverages, other interactions afforded to the player include accessing their smartphone to

check the social media profiles of patrons (a narrativized metric of story progression) and to select a piece of background music from among many lo-fi/chillhop tracks.¹⁴⁵



Fig. 14 A screenshot of the drink-making process in Coffee Talk

Within the social sciences, the cultural importance of the café as a communal space which fosters care and sociality has been well established. As Warner et al (2012) write, the café is a prime example of how “‘care work’ is undertaken in everyday and mundane ways in sites not normally associated with caring, by people who have no formal or informal responsibility or duty to care, and in ways that are invisible to virtually all but those that are directly involved in the relationship” (para. 38). *Coffee Talk* supports these claims by having the player embody a barista with a sympathetic ear and a beverage to soothe patrons’ troubles, in some cases positioning the deft and sensitive dispensing of these beverages as the very reason someone’s life turns out for the better. For all that the game aestheticizes the brewing and serving of coffee and for all the effort

¹⁴⁵ A genre of music that bears a lot of affective similarities to wholesome games and which is similarly centered around relaxation and coziness. Originally, I had wanted to dig into this more, along with the general rise of lo-fi hip hop music alongside wholesomeness, however while lo-fi hip-hop has existed as a genre of music since the 1990’s, little academic work appears to have been written about this music and its accompanying aesthetic. What I was able to find did suggest a possible linkage between listening to this genre of music and the “high-stakes, high-stress environment many 20-year-old or so netizens are a part of today” (Wang, 2020, p. 21). In this initiatory study, Wang coded both video titles and *YouTube* comment sections for lo-fi music compilations suggested that this genre is viewed as a source of comfort for its young listeners, whether they are studying or relaxing (as many video titles suggest they might be) or, interestingly, whether they “suffer from lack of sleep” or seek to “cope with loss, whether it be breaking up with a romantic partner, or something more severe like the death of a loved one” (p. 21). In this sense, *Coffee Talk* is a marquee use case for lofi music and its accompanying aesthetic. Its soundtrack is also idea for listening to while editing one’s dissertation!

put into crafting a series of interesting characters with troubled lives to probe into and ultimately improve, however, there is a glaring absence within the world of *Coffee Talk* - money.

In a class-centric comparison of *Coffee Talk* to another visual novel about serving drinks and lending an ear to patrons in *VA-11 HALL-A* (Sukeban Games, 2016), Blamey writes that “in *Coffee Talk* the player only exists in the coffee shop. We don’t see them go home, pay bills, or tally up profits at the end of the night.” (2020, para. 6). Unlike the precarious life of the bartender in *VA-11 HALL-A* whose story can come to a premature end through poor play leading to being short on rent money, the player character in *Coffee Talk* explicitly states that they have no concern of the café going out of business.

Although it is true that in both games the player character’s “only mode of expression is through their work,” the stakes of this work are different for the respective player characters (para. 7). Despite appearing to be situated in a densely urban part of Seattle (the fifth-most expensive American city by one estimate¹⁴⁶), only ever having at most three or four patrons on any given evening, and even giving away drinks on the house on multiple occasions, there is never any socioeconomic stress placed on the player of *Coffee Talk*. If anything, through encouraging the player to play with the soundtrack and make customizable latte art (See Fig. 15), timely service, and with it the tips that real world baristas or even the bartender in *VA-11 HALL-A* live on, are of no concern to the player.



Fig. 15 - To my knowledge this mechanic serves no purpose other than as an added layer of customization, or control.

¹⁴⁶ See Schlosser (2019)

In this sense, *Coffee Talk's* relaxed, lo-fi (dare I say wholesome) aesthetic is made possible through the erasure of exhausting capitalist logics.¹⁴⁷ The elimination of currency, one of the chief objects of the labour of maintaining oneself under capitalism, gives the player character free rein to dote on each customer with all the care of an old friend since they are not otherwise exhausted by having to buy groceries, balance their books, or even wash dishes. Ironically, the game's fantasy of a world with orcs and elves is only its first of many. The lack of any apparent need for money has been shown to be another, but it compliments a third fantasy which I believe is the most important for understanding this game's framing of care and connecting this conversation to control and, with it, an understanding of why making politically meaningful games which center care can be so difficult.

To explain this, I begin with what may be an obvious point. The fact that *Coffee Talk* seeks to tell a specific story means that the player has no ability to control what their character says. Even in less restrictive games, the player almost always¹⁴⁸ has only several dialogue choices at any given time. And while some of these games offer 'incorrect' choices at various points, the player is always free to reload an old save and try again. In *Coffee Talk* this is taken a step further since, as noted above, the only choices the player makes relate to which drinks to make. As such, *Coffee Talk*, and arguably most visual novel games, allow the player to enter into a world where they will always say exactly the 'right' thing. While there may be a disjoint between what an individual player would *want* to say in a given situation and what the game *allows* them to say, the fact remains that the

¹⁴⁷ We alluded to this phenomenon through the nostalgia and wholesomeness Chapter 2 and indeed will speak of it again in the next chapter with reference to the shortcomings of some games which espouse alternate ways of being.

¹⁴⁸ The only examples of games which offer truly unfettered communication that I can think of are online multiplayer games with a chat feature (but here you are communicating with other people) or smaller experimental games like Mateas and Stern's *Façade* (Procedural Arts, 2005) which, while allowing the player to say whatever they want, often have trouble parsing meaning accurately.

player is always given the ability to say the perfect thing at the perfect moment to advance the story towards what the designers have deemed a fulfilling end.

As I said, the fact that game narratives are written in such a way as to be completable is not an earth-shaking observation. However, in the context of *Coffee Talk*, a game which explicitly centers the care work undertaken by members of the service industry, I argue that this gameplay convention smoothes over what is, in reality, a very complex and often difficult set of interpersonal relations that consume one's time and energy. Earlier, I alluded to the fact that we might consider *Coffee Talk* a wholesome game, for good and for ill. Here we see that the same frictionless, apolitical attitude that circulates throughout that community/aesthetic persists in *Coffee Talk* through the removal of many 'realistic' details which would get in the way of the comforting and uplifting story that Toge Productions wished to tell.

Just as *Truck Simulator* adopts a negotiated sense of realism (especially compared to the hyper-realism of *Desert Bus*), here we see that in order for the conceit of *Coffee Talk* to work, the development team needed to take certain liberties with the business of both running a coffee shop and the care work that is part in parcel with being a service worker. Of course, such caring labour is not limited to the service worker – recall what has already been said of Post-Fordist labour and the need to always be 'on'.

This notion of rigidly demanding flexibility is echoed by Ngai in her work on the 'zany' aesthetic of the Post-Fordist labour model, where she qualifies it as "a late capitalist mode of production privileging ever more elastic relations to work and personality" (Ngai, 2012, p. 174). Using Lucille Ball's character from *I Love Lucy* as an example of someone who is constantly thrust into "picking up a new skill" or "taking on a temporary job involving some kind of affective service work," Ngai describes the zany aesthetic as fundamentally performative, marked by both mania and precarity (p. 175). The zany is one who is "constantly in motion" and "constantly confronted by – and

endangered by – too many things coming at her at once” (p. 182, 183).¹⁴⁹ To me, this notion of constant motion again evokes exhaustion the endless cycles of zugzwang while also connecting these ideas to Arendt’s larger point that labour is a process of maintaining the self. However, what distinguishes the waged labour of post-Fordism from Arendt’s labour of maintaining the self is that the former is not directly for one’s own sake regardless of any window dressing that would imply otherwise.¹⁵⁰

Crucial to a complete understanding of how Post-Fordist labour and care work come together in the contemporary moment is an understanding of the neoliberal push towards self-management. Although I suggested in Chapter 1 that the freedom implicit in this ability (read: obligation) to do what one can to survive may offer some space for radical action, here I am more concerned with the troubles caused by the eroding of social welfare. Under a system in which it is every person for themselves, the recourses that are available to the neoliberal subject who needs relief from the maladies of zugzwang are limited by their free time and surplus capital – let the free market decide who can be healthy. Given that those who suffer most under zugzwang are also those who can least afford therapy, much of the care work that these individuals receive comes in the form of unpaid emotional labour from friends, family, service workers, or indeed strangers on the Internet.¹⁵¹ And while the notion of small communities of care growing together and nurturing one another may be an effective model of care, not all such communities are created equal.

By removing the risk that the player can ever say the wrong thing, *Coffee Talk* creates a fantasy of control in which communal care comes together as smoothly as a cup of joe, thereby sidestepping any deeper percolation about care in the service industry. Instead, the work of care is idealized through the unfolding of a heavily curated narrative that nonetheless gives the player the sense that

¹⁴⁹ This notion of constant motion is of course a perfect evocation of my sense of zugzwang.

¹⁵⁰ In this sense, games like *Diner Dash* or *Crazy Taxi* (Hitmaker, 1999), both in name and in the pace of gameplay, are more honest depictions of the nature of Post-Fordist labour than *Coffee Talk*, in which the absence of any need to earn a wage allows for a smoother play experience.

¹⁵¹ See the next chapter for a good example of this in *Kind Words*.

they can influence the destinies of the café's patrons.¹⁵² For me, this recalls part of Juul's definition of game, namely the idea that a player's investment in it leads them to *seek a specific outcome*. In this sense, it seems that there is a clear relation between care and control in video games, but not just from a game design perspective.¹⁵³

3.4.2 – *Controlling State Control in Papers, Please*

In *Papers, Please*, the player takes on the role of an immigration officer who works at the border of a fictionalized authoritarian country called Arstotzka. Gameplay is divided into distinct days during which the player must interrogate all who attempt to cross the border while inspecting each of their required documents to ensure there are no irregularities. Should a player ever turn away someone whose documents were in order or grant someone passage when they were not supposed to, a machine in the player's booth immediately prints out a demerit ticket. As subsequent demerits are collected, they begin to impact the player's daily wage. At the end of each day, this money is spent to take care of various members of the player's family by paying for rent and heat in their home, or by purchasing medicine, toys, and other person-specific items as the need arises. Given that there is a set time limit to each day and a player's salary is based on the number of correctly processed visitors, going over each document slowly is not an option.

During the workday, the player's screen is divided in two. In the upper half, there is a top-down view of the border, including the lineup of would-be visitors and the armed guards who arrest or shoot any who attempt to enter Arstotzka illegally. In the lower is a first-person view of the player's kiosk with a close up of their desk on which they can freely arrange documents for inspection. At first the player only has to inspect visitors' passports, but as geopolitical tensions increase between Arstotzka and its neighbours, more documents are added, made obsolete, and more tools (including a fingerprint tester and a body scanner) are added to the kiosk. All of these

¹⁵² This will also be relevant when discussing *Kind Words* and the limits to the care it makes possible.

¹⁵³ Though beyond my immediate focus, I see ties here to power dynamics in BDSM couples (Cutler et al, 2020).

new rules are foreshadowed in daily newspaper articles and then clarified by instructions from the player's superiors at the beginning of each day (See Fig. 16).



Fig. 16 – A screenshot of the player's view during the workday

Over the course of the game, the player is faced with many difficult choices including whether to aid the efforts of a group that seeks to bring down the government or whether to steal the passports of visitors from a different nation so that the player and their family can flee the country. At various points, one is also given access to a gun which may be used (or not used) to shoot dissidents on the upper half of the screen. As such, the game has a many endings which are largely informed by whether players are able to do their job well enough to keep their family alive and avoid execution themselves, whether they try to bring about a revolution (the success of which is ultimately implied to lead to a new regime whose mode of governance is just as oppressive) or whether they escape the country (which is also implied to be nothing more than substituting one regime for another).

At first, the player is conditioned to think that they are constantly surveilled and that mistakes will lead to punishment. Through this “policy of coercions that act upon the body” the player is rendered “subjected and practiced,” into what Foucault calls a “docile body,” a compliant subject who is too exhausted to do anything but become comfortable with the status quo (1979, p. 138). In order to do progress in the game, it is necessary to find efficient ways to complete each

workday. For instance, one must stamp a visitor's passport with an approval or rejection in order to dismiss them and move on to the next person, so placing the passport directly beneath where that stamp is fixed saves time. Here, I think the game succeeds at showing how quickly overwork and the desire for survival can render one complicit with fascism. It is only as the player develops a 'system' for processing papers quickly (i.e. for *making do*) that they can begin to take calculated risks by helping others who wish to navigate the machine in illicit ways.

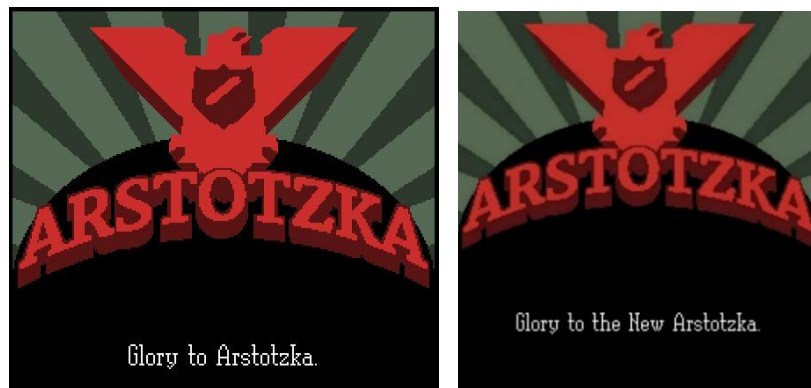
In short order, however, players are knocked off kilter in a manner that recalls Deleuze's (1992) notion of the control society, the operating model of which is "modulation," a set of "inseparable variations [...] continually changing from one moment to the next" (p. 178-9). In *Papers, Please*, one is made to feel the full brunt of 'modulation' as new documents are introduced leading to more information that needs to be verified before a decision can be reached. Like Ngai's Post-Fordist zany who is "constantly confronted by – and endangered by – too many things coming at her at once," the player, here must be flexible, ready to contort themselves to suit every unforeseen circumstance (p. 183).¹⁵⁴ ¹⁵⁵Just as one set of rules is introduced, it is swiftly replaced or repealed, and the learning process must begin anew. Where once, Deleuze argues, we "were always starting over again ([...] from school to barracks, from barracks to factory)," in our present-day control society, "you never finish anything," never feel like you have a steady footing before it is

¹⁵⁴ Specifically, Ngai centers Lucille Ball's character from *I Love Lucy* as an example of someone who is constantly thrust into "picking up a new skill" or "taking on a temporary job involving some kind of affective service work," to describe the zany aesthetic as fundamentally performative, marked by both mania and precarity (p. 175).

¹⁵⁵ Stenros' writing is also evocative of Deleuze's notion of endless modulations when he states that games are "a technology for attempting to contain and control the power of play," (2018, p. 25).

time to make another costly move (p. 179).¹⁵⁶ Once more any act of empathy or compassion pushes the player character and their family closer to financial ruin. Once more the wheel turns.¹⁵⁷

With the introduction of the supposed revolutionary faction, the game encourages the player to believe that they can make a difference in the world from the claustrophobic, even panoptic space of their kiosk. One continues to do the same work they have always done but now with renewed purpose. Rather than continuing to bend and twist to meet the demand of this never-ending stream of changing rules, the implication is that one now toils to usher in meaningful change. Instead, through the use of the same iconography and the same slogan, it is made clear to the player that this new regime they have helped install will be much like the old (See Figs 17 and 18).



Figs. 17 and 18 – A comparison of the ending screens seen when the player does (right) or does not (left) depose the Arstotzkan government. The identical language and iconography heavily implies that the new regime is no different from the old.

¹⁵⁶ Here we might think of *Desert Bus* and *American Truck Simulator*, neither of which have a clear ending, instead inviting the player to continue their engagement for as long as they wish. When I stop playing one such game in order to play another, it is not so much an ending as it is a beginning. Also of note is Arendt's sense that labour never designates a finished product, or my corresponding claim that critique is an endless process. We might equally speak of student loans or credit card debt, or even return to the anxieties of the video gaming backlog here. In all cases, what Deleuze concludes rings true: in the control society, "a man is no longer a man confined but a man in debt" (p. 181). Just as the revolution has not-yet come, and Juul's failure is contingent on the video game being not-yet completed, one's bill is always somehow not-yet paid. At the same time, I am reminded of Moten and Harney (2013), who engage with the necessity of being in debt and the acknowledgement that certain debts will never be repaid. Important to distinguish here is to whom each debt is owed and what the difference is between the mutual dependence of unpaid debts in the undercommons and the physical and social stasis enforced on someone who cannot afford to pay their debts under a capitalist system.

¹⁵⁷ This recalls the exhaustion experienced by Ahmed and others who complain within systems larger than themselves. Institutions create arbitrary and mercurial sets of standards and practices only to change them without warning and suddenly one risks finding themselves to be a walking infraction, which may necessitate a rapid and forced exit.

Rather than breaking the cycle or even starting over as one does in a disciplinary society, here it was heavily implied that hegemony, like anything else in the society of control, is never finished. Though the game combines elements of the society of discipline and the society of control, it seems that Deleuze's model resonates the strongest here. *Papers, Please* plays into the overlap between labour and leisure to depict the utter mundanity of bureaucracy and the cruelty of the filing cabinet, and in so doing it speaks to cycles of zugzwang and the challenging labour of enacting change within an exhausting system.¹⁵⁸

In discussing the status quo and its alternatives, Weeks introduces a helpful distinction between "reform and revolution," which can be summarized as the choice of whether to fight to change a system from within or to build something new, as if from the outside (2011, p. 228). Part of her reason for making this distinction is that the difference between these two forms of critical action can be hard to parse. In speaking of various "feminist appropriations of the work ethic" across history, for example, Weeks' stance is ambivalent (p. 68). While activism "have proved to be powerful weapons for change," it remains the case that many women's labour movements "serve at the same time to expand the scope of the work ethic to new groups and new forms of labor, and to reaffirm its power" (p. 68). The question for Weeks therefore becomes whether we are better off critiquing the current system with a view to making it better (reforming it) or whether we ought instead to dismantle the system outright (revolt against it) and start anew.¹⁵⁹

However, whether one is able to readily make this decision or whether it is often made for them (if not precluded from them) is an entirely different matter, one which directly ties to energy and exhaustion. This is equally true for both of the games discussed in this section.

¹⁵⁸ Though I do not wish to go further with the analysis in the interest of space, this game is, I think, an interesting blend of Foucauldian discipline and Deleuzian control.

¹⁵⁹ Oddly, even Weeks admits that revolution may not be possible in the contemporary moment. Instead, she seems to suggest that given the apparent impossibility of revolution, we ought instead to focus on "the potential generativity of reforms" emblemized in what she calls the "utopian demand" (p. 229, 228). In a certain sense, this seems to be a restating of what queer theorists have been saying about the critical potential of queer futurity and queer utopia for years, however Weeks is not as explicit on this point.

While *Coffee Talk* presents a positive take on the care work characteristic of many service industry jobs as a way to broaden what games can be about, it is ultimately a game about comfort and all the political stasis implied therein. Like many wholesome games, it asks what life would be like if our jobs and our relationships were just a bit slower but does not interrogate the material reasons why this (re)generation is not possible for so many. Despite much of the story's ease and positivity relying on an erasure of money and the smoothing of care work, *Coffee Talk* does not make any connection between energy, the wage, and maintenance of life. It does not ask any questions that are larger than itself, instead opting to tell a few warm tales over some warmer beverages. As a result, I argue that even the most activist reading of this game can only lead one down the path of reform, like the Slow Food Movement before it. *Coffee Talk* succeeds at breaking from certain hegemonic norms in game design and storytelling, but its shallow, non-threatening depiction of care¹⁶⁰ does little to breed collectivity or to offer clear ways forward.¹⁶¹

Papers, Please is also ultimately a narrative about reform, however with a decidedly differing politic. By focusing on the arbitrary and unfeeling mechanisms that prop up the State and the plights of those who are forced to move within it, the game sheds light on the mundane violence of institutional power. Even when the player succeeds at risking life and limb to bring about what they imagine to be a revolution, their reward is being subjected to the same tools of oppression with slightly different branding. Whereas in *Coffee Talk*, the player character always says the right thing, in *Papers, Please*, one has no real control over anything outside of their booth. They are partway up a chain of command, exerting power over would-be visitors and immigrants while still

¹⁶⁰ For more on shallow or misguided efforts towards care in games, see Ruberg and Scully-Blaker, 2021.

¹⁶¹ In this sense, I see Toge Productions' game as an emblematic example of Deleuze's modulations of control in that it is a reform that feels like a revolution. What I mean is that while *Coffee Talk* makes certain clear points about the velocity of life and importance of collectivities of care, that is all it does. Like everything else in the control society, it does not finish its line of thought by connecting these goals with their material obstacles. As Ahmed famously notes, "mere persistence can be an act of disobedience," but *Coffee Talk* does not persist, it is not in the business of being-against anything in particular (2014, p. 37). Instead, it is a palliative play experience that does not move past wondering at what the world could be like if we all had a little café to call our own.

being crushed under the weight of the State. As long as one acts as a gatekeeper for a State, they can never truly revolt against it.

I am not suggesting here that to take part in capitalism in any way is to betray the cause of revolution, nor do I think this is Pope's belief. One must of course maintain themselves, whatever that means in a given moment. However, what *Papers, Please* and *Coffee Talk* each highlight is how difficult revolution truly is given the exhausting demand that the labour of maintenance holds on one's time. While Toge Productions' coffee-spun story is only able to hit such cozy notes through a utopic erasure of money and the smoothing of care work, Lucas Pope's dystopic bureaucracy simulator suggests that the necessity of the wage and the ubiquity of Empire work hand in hand to stymie revolution such that the only language of 'change' is that which leads to more of the same. The unhindered success of the barista in *Coffee Talk* and the inevitable failure of the border guard in *Papers, Please* are two sides of the same coin.

The draining state of being in zugzwang leaves us yearning for a rest and yet never feeling rested, it leaves us in want of change and yet the revolution is always not-yet here.¹⁶² Perhaps this is why, even in the leisurely space of patientgaming, nostalgia for the past is more comfortable than planning for a better future. For many, it is either simplest or best for their own survival to go with the flow, whatever it may be.

¹⁶² Ngai argues that the "playful, hypercharismatic aesthetic" of the zany "is really an aesthetic about work" which "speaks to a politically ambiguous erosion of the distinction between playing and working" (p. 188). She ties this to Terranova's (2000) description of 'free' labour: the process by which "knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (Terranova, 2000, p. 37).¹⁶² And while both Ngai and Terranova associate the exploitative nature of late capitalism with speed (through Ngai's frantic zany and the instantaneity of Terranova's "cultural flows", which are "always and already" immersed in capitalism), thinkers like Sharma and Ahmed teach us that the same can be said of even slower forms of labour (p. 38). Given all of this, it is difficult to conceive of many opportunities for an individual to begin imagining reform, let alone revolt.

3.5 – On Flows and Exits: *Animal Crossing* and *Stardew Valley*

3.5.1 - *The Ebb and Flow of the Tide: Pandemic Play in Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

Despite its charming, rural aesthetic, Nintendo's popular *Animal Crossing* series has proven vexing for game scholarship. Ian Bogost (2013) articulates this well when he identifies a tension that emerges between two contending operational logics in the title, which he dubs "consumption and naturalism" (para. 1). On the one hand, *Animal Crossing's* underlying aesthetic seems to celebrate the quietude of small-town life. Beyond the game's setting, certain mechanics encourage players to move slowly through the game world, both spatially and temporally. For instance, the world of *Animal Crossing* operates in stark contrast to most games in that it runs in real-time, which brings about moments of mandatory waiting.

At the same time, however, the way that the game measures one's progress is fundamentally capitalist. With no overarching narrative and no clear end to any game in the series, the core 'plot' of each *Animal Crossing* title revolves around spending Bells to develop one's property or even the town itself. Each time one's housing debt is paid in full, their house can be remodeled or expanded and so back into debt one goes. And while one's balance owed never accrues any interest, the pressure to invest substantial time and in-game currency towards the betterment of one's town and the collection of material goods (furniture, clothes, etc) can be seen to reproduce the same capitalist rhythms of labour and debt that many feel in their daily lives. Even so, it is a well-loved series of games (and, as we saw in Chapter 2, a notable favourite among patientgamers).

Unsurprisingly, when the most recent title in the series, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020) was announced as part of a Nintendo Direct in late 2018, fans were ecstatic. Excluding a mobile game¹⁶³ that released in 2017, it had been six years since a new entry in the series. As more

¹⁶³ For a more in-depth discussion of this game as it relates to the series' capitalist logics, see Scully-Blaker, 2019.

details began to emerge, players learned that *New Horizons* would leave the mainland behind, placing the player on a deserted island and inviting them to shape not only their home and their town but the very landscape of in their own image. When game finally released on March 20, 2020, the world was a very different place, due most imminently to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the beginning of dedicated stay-at-home orders in a number of countries.

Suddenly, a game about purchasing a “Deserted Island Getaway Package” and beginning a new life among talking animals took on new significance in popular culture and regimes of self-care. In your daily life, depending on where you lived, you were likely afraid to leave your home for too long, and were often actively advised against going outside for anything that was not essential. Contact with friends and family who did not live with you, especially those who were notably susceptible to complications from COVID-19, was equally discouraged and so those essential trips to buy food were likely to cause stress and anxiety in even those least affected.

Meanwhile, in one’s *Animal Crossing* life, a normal day consisted of strolling casually to the shops, chatting with each and every villager on the way. At first, the local economy was small and there was little on offer, but every day brought the possibility of discovering a new way to decorate one’s home and indeed the whole island. The early stages of *New Horizons* in particular are filled with clear markers of progression, from building lots for new animal villagers to occupy, to gaining the ability to move rivers and mountains so that every inch of one’s island is just-so (See Fig. 19).



Fig. 19 - A player building a new waterfall on their island

Of course, one's animal neighbours are always happy to see the player and even happier to chat or to give and be given gifts. Once a player's relationship with a villager has deepened, the villager will also begin to send them kind letters and come up with special nicknames for the player. The villagers even remember the player's birthday and throw them birthday party each year (See Fig. 20).



Fig. 20 - They got the player a special cake and everything!

Each day, once one had checked the shops, pulled up any errant weeds, spoken to their neighbours, and so on, players could hop on a seaplane and fly to other islands where they and their human friends could achieve a virtual proximity that did not break quarantine rules. In a time when the whole nature of social interactions was being re-evaluated, players were going on dates¹⁶⁴, holding wedding ceremonies¹⁶⁵, and building memorials to lost loved ones¹⁶⁶, all within the *Animal Crossing* world. The apparent escapist fantasy of living on a tropical island was transformed into an escapist reality that was seized by many in those moments where they would otherwise be anxious and isolated.

With the cancellation of in-person classes at UC Irvine, I had returned to Canada, first to visit my partner in Vancouver and then to return home to Montreal to stay with my parents for the summer. Beyond wanting to take over some of the burden of grocery shopping and other essential

¹⁶⁴ Hernandez, 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Garst, 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Carpenter, 2020.

errands from them, I was also going to help them pack up their home and move after yet another repossession. This process, which would be stressful under normal circumstances seemed nearly impossible given the onset of a global health crisis. It is an understatement to suggest that the rhythm of my life (and the lives of so many others) was disrupted during this time. But, like so many patientgamers with so many cozy games, I was able to let some of these difficult hours flow by on my virtual island and those of my friends who I could no longer meet in-person.

The concept of *flow* rose to prominence in a work by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in which he defines the term as a state in which “people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008/1990, p. 4). Instilling such a state in the player is often a key goal in game design since it signals that one is fully immersed in the experience of play. As Marcotte (2018) explains, if gameplay can “walk the line between boredom and frustration” then a player may “forget what is around them and [become] totally involved, totally absorbed” (para. 20). However, they caution that the flow state only produces engagement of a very particular and, ironically, quite passive sort.

This much is clear if we return to Csikszentmihalyi’s own definition, the second half of which reads, “the experience [causing the flow state] itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (2008/1990, p. 4). In speaking of flow and games, Soderman states that “A tension exists between the hope that people will adopt a critical attitude toward life and the idea that we should live a life of play” (2021, p. 142). In contrast to Marcotte, he argues that “flow does not erase thought and reflection,” but rather that games and other media objects “gratify our desire for critical distance, for moments of pause and reflection, while simultaneously truncating this distance by turning reflection inward toward the game [or media object]” (p. 142).¹⁶⁷ Of course, the concept and experience of flow are not limited to virtual worlds.

¹⁶⁷ In other words, flow busies the mind with the struggles of the game through “critical instances” which “inhibit thinking that moves progressively outward beyond the game” (p. 142). I am particularly indebted to

Here I might again make the connection to the “machine zone” experienced by slot machine players or other designs that prey on addiction (Schüll, 2012). However, I do not wish to limit my consideration of flow to individual, designed objects.

Speaking more generally, Schrank and Bolter argue that the flow state is one which “allows people to be perfectly subjugated within their systems,” whatever those systems may be (2014, p. 57).¹⁶⁸ They suggests that, when flowing, “people forget that they are being subjugated: their doubts and distractions are kept to a minimum, and all human labor is positively absorbed into the system” (p. 57). At first glance, this characterization of the flow state may seem to unfairly rob the spectator of any agency. Indeed, one could not be faulted for likening the flow state to Adorno and Horkheimer’s framing of the consumer of media, a cultural dupe from whom “no independent thinking must be expected” (1944, p. 137). However, I believe that there is a key difference between the flow state and the Culture Industry that may allow the former to deflect at least some of the critiques levied against the latter, namely that flow is a force that acts on both leisure *and* labour.

Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi describes jobs as flow-like since “they have built in goals, feedback, rules, and challenges, all of which encourage one to become involved in one’s work, to concentrate and lose oneself in it” (2008/1990, p. 162). Although he frames this in a unilaterally positive light, it is clear from the above commentators that the experience and context of flow are not the same for all people. Here I re-introduce Sharma’s notion of privileged temporalities to ask whether the same relation may be observed with the flow state (which is, after all, a particular relation to time). Consider Csikszentmihalyi’s famous visualization of flow:

this observation for the way that it renders compatible my simultaneous, seemingly contradictory desires to argue that flow breeds political stasis *and* that no play is ever without reflection.

¹⁶⁸ I am indebted to Marcotte (2018) for this citation.

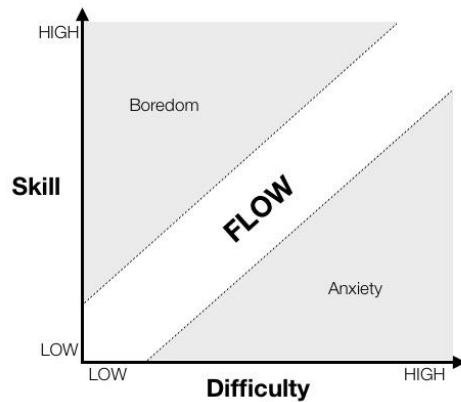


Fig. 21 – Now that’s what I call a flow chart.

In this model, flowing can only be experienced if the difficulty of a given task is commensurate with one’s skill, with any imbalance in the two leading to either boredom (if the task is too easy) or anxiety (if the task is too difficult). But given what has been said about both boredom and anxiety at various points in this dissertation, I am left wondering what is lost by suggesting that either of these experiences are not flows in their own right.

Perhaps it is a trite observation to make, but time continues to pass regardless of whether one is bored or engaged, anxious or comfortable. And if flow is to be understood as deep engagement in a particular task, then surely the task of maintaining one’s existence must entail a flow state of some description. Is someone more ‘skilled’ at this activity if they have the class privilege to be bored? Is someone less ‘skilled’ if their lack of class privilege induces anxiety? Here I suggest that *zugzwang*, the draining force of which prevents one from seeing beyond it (i.e. one is “so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter”) can be framed as a flow state in its own right. In fact, it does not seem a stretch to suggest that any activity can be said to encourage a flow state of one sort or another. Just as one cannot refuse to play certain games (the object *and* the logic), one cannot refuse to experience certain flows. The way that one’s experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has differed based on factors ranging from age and class to country of residence are all good examples of this, for example.

While I by no means want to downplay the existence of a hegemonic Flow State, here I argue that there are multiple flows which are experienced along the vectors of one's privilege. Someone working on a production line to assemble circuits can occupy a flow state just as much as a patientgamer who is playing through one of their comfort games. Despite the fact that one flow is materially enforced or at least taken on to make one's labour efficient or manageable while the other is actively sought out as an escape, both are arguably a state of flow.¹⁶⁹ Even when Marcotte writes that flow "must be queered to disrupt the status quo" by creating "visible gaps and seams in the experience", I maintain that this disrupted flow is a flow all the same, staccato though it may be (2018, para 20-1).¹⁷⁰ At its core, the flow state is worth understanding since its status as a design concept allows us to analyze and critique a given flow (i.e. a given experience of an activity over time) as a deliberate (i.e. designed) outcome.¹⁷¹ As a means of putting this into practice, I now turn to another video game world to examine the various flows at play.

3.5.2 - Exit Through the Seed Shop: Stardew Valley and Escapist Flows

ConcernedApe's farming and life simulator game, *Stardew Valley* is another title which encourages players to enter into a regular routine. Like the *Harvest Moon* series which inspires it, *Stardew Valley* puts the player in the role of a fledgling farmer who works to resuscitate the land and indeed the wider community, in this case a village called Pelican Town. Players plant crops, raise animals, mine for valuable ores, and go fishing all with a view to slowly building up the money necessary to upgrade one's tools and farm amenities. In addition to being sold for money, most items that the player collects in the game world can be given to the inhabitants of Pelican Town (all of whom have their respective likes and dislikes) in order to gradually build affection with them. As

¹⁶⁹ I might equally add that the de-politicization of wholesome games encourages or contributes to a flow state all its own, or indeed that boredom (whether we treat it as oppressive or emancipatory) is also grounded in one's relation to a particular flow state.

¹⁷⁰ However, given that I intend to discuss glitches and other interruptions in later chapters, it is rhetorically useful to distinguish between a singular, hegemonic Flow State against which we may revolt and the parallel notion that there are multiple flows.

¹⁷¹ This will become particularly useful in subsequent chapters when we discuss the figure of the glitch.

the player's relationships with other characters deepen, they are rewarded with further insight into the lives of their neighbours, gifts, and in some cases a chance at romance and marriage.

Unlike many other farming games of this sort, *Stardew Valley* presents the player with a main 'quest' beyond revitalizing the family farm and turning a profit. Players are prompted to collect "bundles" of specialized items and either donating them to the local community center or selling them off to give money to a corporation, Joja Inc, which has set up shop in Pelican Town. Of the two, donating to the community center is overwhelmingly implied to be the 'good' choice that earns the player boons from mystical creatures and improves the lives and livelihoods of Pelican Town locals. Meanwhile, the Joja representative (with whom the player cannot earn any relationship points) evokes similar real world narratives involving Wal-Mart or other big-box stores moving into small towns and helping him solidifies the corporate presence in town. While the bundles can be completed at one's leisure, the game checks on player progress after two years of gameplay (a trait inherited from *Harvest Moon*). Should the player wish to receive the best ending by this point, they will need to develop a sophisticated and adaptable to-do list that balances both physical and emotional labour.

Depending on the in-game season, a typical day in *Stardew Valley* might involve watering plants, feeding and talking to livestock, foraging for herbs, talking to as many villagers as one can find, giving particular items to particular characters, entering the mine to clear out some monsters, and spending any remaining energy chopping wood to eventually use for upgrading one's farm structures. While the player does embody some aspects of the Post-Fordist zany aesthetic here (weather, holidays, and NPC birthdays can throw off one's schedule for instance) I would argue that one of the appeals of *Stardew Valley* is that one's day-to-day activities do not vary much. In contrast to *Papers, Please* where the State apparatus creates new and arbitrary rules each day, the player is only really at the mercy of the weather or the random chance that one rare item or another drops from a rock in the mine. While timely completion of the bundles does help secure the "good" ending,

the standards the player is expected to meet are clear from the first day and do not change. Whether intentional or not, I suggest that one of the reasons for this 'comfortably busy' flow lies at the center of the game's plot.

The opening of *Stardew Valley* features a cutscene narrated by the player's aging grandfather. He is near death, and he bequeaths the farmland to the player, stating that the drudgeries of city life will one day bring them to Pelican Town (See Fig. 22).



Fig. 22 A prophetic message from the player's grandfather.

Next, we see that the player character is working in a cramped, gray cubicle for Joja Corporation (See Fig. 23). They open their grandfather's letter and learn that they have been bequeathed his farmland in Stardew Valley. The scene cuts to the player riding a bus to their new home, and the game begins in earnest.

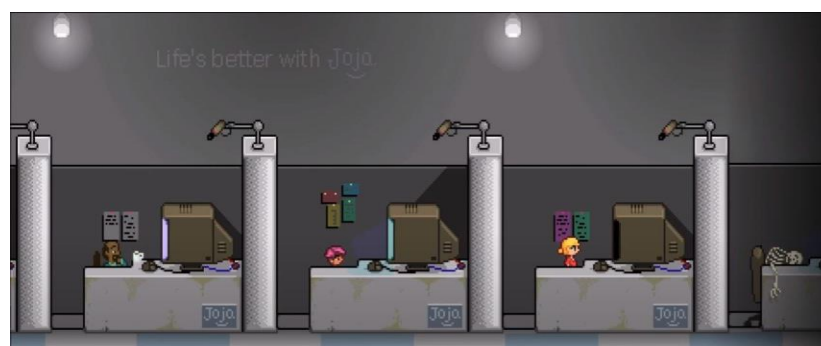


Fig. 23 - The player character's life before the farm.

While this scene is relatively short and the player's past at Joja Corporation is by no means central to the plot, its themes inform the core conceit of the game and the flow(s) that it attempts to cultivate. We might, for instance, observe that, like *Coffee Talk*, there is never any question here of

how the player can afford to completely uproot their life and move to a new town to revive a farm through labour that appears to be wholly new to them. Beyond financial constraints, there is also no question of what becomes of any of the player's city friends or the rest of their family. The logistical questions only begin when the player steps off the bus and begins life on the farm and even then, such questions only relate to the welfare of Pelican Town and its inhabitants.

This notion of a clean break, the ability to disconnect oneself from all the travails of corporate life city living is by no means unique to this game. Vossen (2020) deftly connects this story formula to "Hallmark Channel" movies such as Netflix's *Falling Inn Love*, which is billed as a film about a woman who is "suddenly liberated from 'working for some soulless corporation' running on a 'career hamster wheel' and exposed to a totally different way of life in rural New Zealand" (p. 110). While the signifiers change (rural New Zealand can become a pastoral European town, the inn can become a winery) Vossen argues that the lives led by the women in these films are "both aspirational and punishing [...] There are no charming but run-down inns waiting to be won by me..." (p. 110). These films are not the only media that parrot such a narrative, however.

As Vossen continues, "there is a way to live a simple slower-paced life to which I escape for a few hours each day, where my debt only goes down and never up, where I can easily make enough money to live, and where I never have to fear having my job or home taken away from me" – it is the world of *Animal Crossing* (p. 110). While she goes on to complicate the series' tension between consumption and naturalism in a variety of ways, her reading of *Animal Crossing* suggests that the series occupies a similar narrative function to *Stardew Valley* or to *Falling Inn Love*. And while it is certainly true that both *Animal Crossing* and *Stardew Valley* can be (and have been) played in a variety of ways that push against this tidy narrative of bucolic escape¹⁷² both games begin with a player leaving one life behind for another, with no questions posed as to how is made possible. While many have made the (often oversimplified) argument that video games themselves are

¹⁷² See Dwyer (2020) and Hansen (2020).

escapist power fantasies,¹⁷³ these games are both about escapes of a more material and seemingly less fantastical sort.

In a paper I co-wrote with Bo Ruberg (2021), we discussed the notion of games and escape through more recent work from Sharma in which she theorizes “exit” as “a cultural fantasy” brought forth by “the pain of capitalism” and which manifests as a desire to remove oneself from this larger system (2017, para. 1). While a total exit from something as systemic as capitalism is effectively impossible, Sharma maintains that the very desire for escape is equally problematic, going as far as to suggest it is “a privilege that occurs at the expense of cultivating and sustaining conditions of collective autonomy,” one that “stands in direct contradistinction to care” (para. 4). While her focus here is clearly on particular bodies enacting a particular type of exit (for instance, the white men who helm Ubisoft repeatedly claiming that their games are not political¹⁷⁴), Ruberg and I observed that there are serious problems with her broader conclusion that exit’s polar opposite is care:

By limiting exit to the context of global capitalism and patriarchy and suggesting that escape is a fantasy, Sharma undercuts the critical potential of withdrawal and overlooks the fact that, especially for minoritized individuals, exit can be fundamentally necessary. Sharma’s work also does not consider the contexts in which staying is either an obligation or an impossibility. Staying is not always an act of care and exit itself is not always care-less.

(Ruberg and Scully-Blaker, 2021, p. 658)

We contrasted Sharma’s stance with the work, and indeed the life, of Sara Ahmed for whom “sometimes, leaving can be staying, with feminism” (2016a). As I alluded to in Chapter 1, her resignation from Goldsmiths University following the institution’s inability to take meaningful action in response to issues of sexual harassment shows that “it is the work one does and not the context in which one does it that fosters care” (Ruberg and Scully-Blaker, 2021, p. 658). Within Weeks’ framework of reform and revolt, Sharma’s exit fantasy represents an individualistic refusal

¹⁷³ See Yee, 2006 and Calleja, 2010, for example

¹⁷⁴ See Castello, 2019

to do either which ultimately serves to perpetuate the status quo, but there are many who relate to exit differently and still others who are not granted entrance into spaces which afford them the ability to make that choice in the first place. While not all scholars, and certainly not all individuals, have the ability to quit their job and still remain financially stable, Ahmed's exit and her work to speak truth to power regarding the exits of so many others shows that care is not as fragile as Sharma may have implied.

While I have critiqued games like *Animal Crossing* and *Stardew Valley* (or indeed *Coffee Talk* and *American Truck Simulator*) for being designed in such a way that players are able to enter into a flow state that is distinctly more comfortable than the one that they may inhabit in everyday life, I do not want my reader to assume that this is an inherently bad thing. While it is unfortunate that these and many other titles sidestep systemic issues caused by global capitalism to craft a cozier experience, this is an issue that manifests in the *design* of these games, not necessarily how they are *played*. With the theoretical ties between labour, leisure, and the video game object now thoroughly explored, the final two chapters of this dissertation will move to the practices of design and play specifically as a means of articulating the range of possible actions that might be taken to combat zugzwang through radical slowness.

3.6 – Conclusion: Accepting Constants and Seeking Alternatives

This chapter has served to unpack the tensions between labour and leisure in video games from several perspectives, each of which was tied to several larger theoretical concepts to make clear connections between work and play in virtual spaces and in everyday life. I contrasted the designs *Desert Bus* and *American Truck Simulator* to make observations about a historical shift in understanding about what games can or should be about and argued that the *Truck Simulator* series proves that play experiences can manifest into real-world actions. I disentangled the concepts of gamification and workification to ultimately make the case that they both speak to the same

fundamental ties between labour and leisure that are asserted by Arendt and Agamben, among others.

Next, I discussed *Coffee Talk* as a game about care and Post-Fordist service work. It is a game that celebrates the human desire we have to care for one another, a compulsion that was shown to be not fully explorable in everyday life due to the need to earn a living wage. Meanwhile, *Papers, Please* carefully traces the contours of what players can control and what they cannot. A relation between care and control in games was theorized in this context based on the fact that players only engage in games because they care about arriving at a measurable outcome.

Finally, *Animal Crossing* and *Stardew Valley* were both shown to represent how the free space of goal-less play is readily organized and regimented by flow-like rhythms and how property ownership and fleeing corporate life have become escapist fantasies for many.

All of these games center work in a number of ways that one may instinctively want omitted from a leisurely space of play, but they do so precisely because people actually play in these ways. The games in question, along with design concepts such as gamification, control, and (hegemonic) flow, make clear that leisure is a form of labour. At the same time, these discussions have also revealed that this is not an inherently bad thing. There are potential ways forward here. While gamification and workification share the same goal, Rauch's framing of this relation makes the more nefarious aspects of this process easier to identify. Although control can be read as an oppressive, top-down force, it also suggests the ways that individuals may take agency for themselves to act because they care. And while the traditional flow state is one that breeds comfort and compliance, there is no exit, no outside to this equation – we simply have to find different and better flows.

The central claim of this dissertation that one of the reasons that the status quo persists despite any number of obvious shortcomings and impending consequences for continuing to live as we have been is because most of us are too exhausted to do the work necessary to organize and

maintain a large-scale revolution. This work of maintenance is particularly difficult based on the fact that many of the institutions that we would seek to change or dismantle do not need to expend energy to stay in the game in the same way as human actors. As such, those who have the most need for meaningful change do not have enough energy to persist in that seemingly endless struggle for revolution that has not-yet come because the need to earn a wage and maintain oneself leaves one drained. This, in so many words, is why I say that our exhaustion is perpetuated by our being in *zugzwang*, a state in which no move that we are capable of making is advantageous to us.

While the present system generally affords everyone the time to take breaks, this so-called leisure time is only tolerated insofar as it is necessary to keep one's body in labour-ready condition. As a result, time spent away from the office is only essentially (re)generative enough for us to get out of bed the next morning and go do our work all over again. While there are various small ways that we can 'make do' within our daily lives and seemingly pull one over on the rules, such victories are often fleeting, hard-won, or both.

Even leisure itself, this 'free' space apart from the working day, is generative of its own sort of exhaustion. Like the nostalgic longing of the patientgamers, I have argued that all leisure serves as a vessel for excess energy that distracts from the problems of the present. Given the choice between the despairing at the status quo¹⁷⁵ and becoming comfortable with a systemic routine, whatever one chooses their exhaustion is a foregone conclusion. Even if our common sense of leisure time is not as obviously essential for the maintenance of the self, I hope that this chapter has shown the various ways that it is essential to the maintenance of our exhaustion and with it of the status quo.

It is based on this that I am proposing a reclamation of our leisure time.

¹⁷⁵ Though I have not dwelled on it much, I see despair as acting very similarly to comfort here. It is, above all, a passive feeling of helplessness that prevents one from acting. None of this is to say that it is a personal failing to feel ways that are not threatening to the status quo, comfort, despair, and many other affects which result in stasis are rather symptoms of the system working as intended.

Indeed, how we work and how we play are not themselves the cause of zugzwang, it is rather how they have been organized under capitalism which exhausts us. And if, following Arendt and Agamben, we must always be at work, then let us change what we are working on and at so that it is no longer productive from a capitalist standpoint, whether of surplus capital or indeed of the exhaustion of those who need the system to change. Within the context of games as both objects and logics, I see this as a problem which can be addressed from two perspectives:

- We can work to **design** games whose politics are critical of the status quo and/or which offer playable models of alternative modes of being. Recalling my distinction between comfort and rest made in Chapter 2, there is certainly room to design games that are **restful** within this project, but, recalling the discourses surrounding wholesome games, this cannot be done by ignoring the injustices of global capitalism lest one end up engendering **comfort** and reifying the status quo. This work will be the subject of the next chapter.
- Additionally, we can reshape the way that people **play** video games as a means to reshape how we might play the larger games of everyday life. I agree with Arendt's characterization of labour as endlessly necessary and necessarily endless and insist like Keeling does that we relish in this quality. Rather than finding a way to stop labour, we must reshape it. This is clearly a massive project beyond the scope of any one document or person, but here I want to take steps towards that goal by looking to the play and the player of games to interrogate the ways we might trifle with, and ultimately dismantle, the business of the dominant. This will be the subject of the fifth and final chapter.

This chapter has completed the thread that began in Chapter 2 by looking at the video game object to conclude my sense of how exhaustion persists and why revolution has eluded us thus far. We have established that all forms of human activity are also forms of labour, but this is not something to mourn. Instead, it gives us a familiar framework with which to ask what we are working towards and how we might work differently. We will now be able to discern which labour is truly necessary and which labour is only required for the perpetuation of unjust systems which oppress and exhaust. Let us now look to the labour that *needs* to be done and refuse the labour that *does not*.

Chapter 4 - Designing Against Exhaustion: The Work and Limits of Game Making

4.1 – Communal Care or Sweet Nothings?

The Steam page for *Kind Words* (*lo-fi chill beats to write to*), describes it as “A game about writing nice letters to real people. Write and receive encouraging letters in a cozy room. Trade stickers and listen to chill music. We’re all in this together. Sometimes all you need are a few kind words.”

(Popcannibal, 2019). In the game, the player is represented by a small androgenous figure who inhabits a snug bedroom floating in abstract space (See Fig. 24). When play begins the character gets out of their tiny bed and sits down at their tiny desk. Gameplay then consists of either writing short notes that will be sent out for other players to read or replying to notes that others have written. Like *Coffee Talk*, the game’s lo-fi visuals and soundtrack are tooled toward producing an environment of warmth and care, with the added element of helping real people instead of fictional characters only serving to intensify the affective connections one might form.

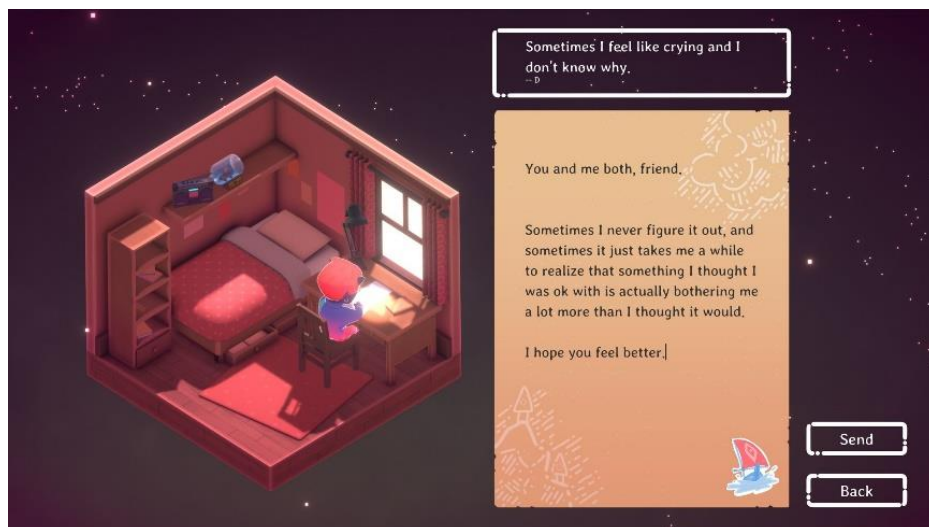


Fig. 24 - A screenshot of a player writing a reply to a note. Given the personal nature of the questions posed through *Kind Words*, I have opted to only take screenshots from public-facing articles about the game, as opposed to sharing pictures of my own gameplay.

From my play experience, the notes that are passed back and forth in *Kind Words* are generally of three kinds: there are those who ask for advice about a specific problem, those who simply wish to vent about an issue, and those who seek to chat with other players through open-

ended questions.¹⁷⁶ And indeed, Popcannibal roughly accounts for these categories in the game's 'Help' menu. Beyond basic instructions about how to send and receive messages, the game also advises players on how to write requests ("It can be hard to share your problems... Go ahead and let it out.") and how to offer constructive replies to each other ("if it's something you can relate to, maybe they'd like to hear how you handled it or just how you felt"). The nature of the advice sought can range from input on an everyday decision to requests for help with more serious issues around mental health and interpersonal relationships¹⁷⁷ (See Fig. 25).

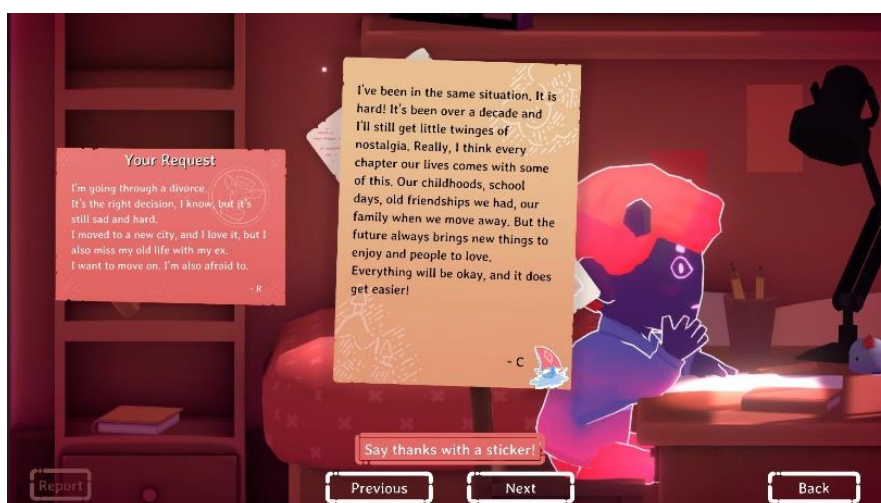


Fig. 25 - A screenshot of a player receiving a reply to their note.

While a game of this nature would seem to be fertile ground for trolling and harassment, it has instead managed to cultivate an earnest and supportive community that befits the coziness of the player character's 'home', the game's lo-fi soundtrack, and the titular invitation to reflect and relax. Given this, one may argue that *Kinds Words* is precisely the sort of game that might help combat exhaustion and undo zugzwang. After all, in the struggle against neoliberal individualism and oppressive institutions, collectivity and a communal model of care are both promising ways

¹⁷⁶ There are also a number of positive messages that do not generally solicit replies which may be sent as paper airplanes which float through the void that surrounds the player character's home, but given that these do not generate conversations, I omit them from my analysis here.

¹⁷⁷ Given the personal nature of these questions and replies, I do not believe that it is ethical to share any that I encountered, anonymized though they may be, but one can get a sense from the screenshots I share here (all taken from large, public-facing articles) of how complex some of the issues players bring to this game can be

forward.¹⁷⁸ However, as we learned in Chapter 2, the commodification of self-care makes the difference between mutual aid and the aestheticization of care being outsourced onto individuals difficult to parse. It is not immediately clear whether all this letter-writing amounts to more than *comforting* one another about the state of the world. It may be that we need more than kind words after all.

4.2 – A Grand Design (of this Chapter)

Within the larger context of the dissertation, this chapter is the first of two that will examine the extent to which video games can be used to combat exhaustion by cultivating radical slowness. This chapter will focus specifically on the problem from the perspective of game design while the fifth and final chapter will do so through the lens of play. What follows, then, is an analysis of game design as both a set of *theories* on how to construct virtual experiences as well as a *practice* that has led to the creation of specific games that exist in the world.

As we saw in Chapter 3, the hegemonic function of leisure is to give us enough energy to keep working, but it also keeps us suitably exhausted through a process we called boredom. As a result, individuals are caught between despairing the status quo or turning away and finding comfort in what they have, a choice that is typified by the patientgamer’s backlog, the truck driver who games while on the open road, and indeed the concept of *zugzwang* itself. Even so, we concluded that it is not leisure or labour *itself* which is to blame here, but rather how the context of the neoliberal, capitalist status quo forces us to choose between two undesirable options.

“Your move.”

As a leisure object par excellence, I have argued that the video game is therefore a space where one might intervene in this exhausting board state. And while I believe that both game design literature and video games themselves have the potential to push back against *zugzwang*,

¹⁷⁸ Again, see Berardi (2009) for theoretical backing to this point, although I arguably root it as much in common sense.

neither can be fully understood without considering the relative strengths and weaknesses of the other. In the same way that Chapter 2 examined wholesome games and Chapter 3 analyzed several types of games *about* work, Chapter 4 will look at games which I read as addressing exhaustion by design. What will become clear is that, despite their apparent compatibility with a politic of radical slowness, it remains uncertain whether the games discussed below can actively address our exhaustion for reasons that stem both from *how they were made* and *the very nature of design itself*.

To begin, I look to game design literature and unpack some of the attitudes and assumptions that emerged as a result of specific theories gaining traction early on in the history of game studies. While I have no doubt that imagining the actions of an ideal player or the goal of designing *for* a specific reaction or moral message have helped designers in the past, I argue that this didactic approach which is often justified by Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric, hinders one's ability to create a game that addresses exhaustion and occupies a (re)generative politic. To support this claim, I look to work by Flanagan and Khaled, whose centering of criticality and reflection respectively has direct implications for our larger discussion of play, critique, and (re)generation, even as they inhabit the same attitudes of earlier works which insist games can reliably have particular *impacts*. These works and their insistence that a designer is the guarantor of critical thought will serve as a jumping-off point for me to argue that all play is inherently critical (which will form the basis of Chapter 5) and that designers would be better served by considering their relations to systems than to players.

Even so, I would never wish to claim that video games *cannot* be designed in ways that can operate against the status quo. While much of design literature is certainly overdetermined in its assumption of the degree to which one can control how a game is taken up and played, the fact remains that many games exist which I read as orbiting something akin the question of exhaustion and radical slowness, whether intentionally or not. As such, I follow a similar trajectory to the previous chapter by doing close readings of four games. I approach each as a slow, even

regenerative experiences based on mechanics, subject matter, and the various ways they invite (but do not didactically insist upon) critical reflection. All of them are designed objects which I argue can help one approach the politic of radical slowness, both by arguing in favour of rest and by addressing its obstacles.

I begin by returning to *Kind Words* and pairing it with Handsome Foxes in Vests'¹⁷⁹ hybrid role-playing game, *The Truly Terrific Travelling Troubleshooter*. Both games do an effective job of slowing one's relation to play by presenting players with situations that require care, whether of real online strangers or of a fictionalized client. They render emotions and emotional labour hyper-visible in ways that recall (or, in the latter case, directly invoke) Mathis' notion of radical softness. Even so, the design of *Kind Words*, alongside the stated goals of its developers, relegates it to a means of making do *within* an oppressive and care-less system, rather than any attempt at a *way out*. In contrast, *The Truly Terrific Travelling Troubleshooter* explicitly challenges players to ask *why* certain forms of labour are valued over others, even if the receptiveness of the player to such a provocation cannot be guaranteed. The discussion of radical softness also inspires a brief interlude on queer failure and the concept of the glitch, which brings a number of concepts from across this dissertation into contact with one another in ways that will prove particularly useful in Chapter 5.

Next, I will pair Laundry Bear's *A Mortician's Tale* with Tracy Fullerton and the USC Game Innovation Lab's *Walden, a game*. Here the focus of each design is less on how individuals might care for one another and more about how we may all benefit from reflecting more deeply on the nature of death and life, respectively. While *A Mortician's Tale's* intersperses reflections on our mortality with invectives against the endless scramble for profits under capitalism throughout its reverent, but linear gameplay, I argue that the game's ending nonetheless idealizes a capitalist vision of success which severely undercuts its apparent critique.

¹⁷⁹ A game-making duo comprised of Dietrich Squinkifer and Jess Marcotte, who have since gone on to co-found *Soft Chaos* with Allison Kyran Cole.

Walden, a game, on the other hand, is much less rigid in its narrative structure. Despite faithfully simulating the life and ideas of Henry David Thoreau, the game allows the player some space to critique its underlying philosophy. I argue that this notion of a text containing arguments against itself is a vital consideration for any design that wishes to operate against hegemony. I will then conclude by speaking about various game development practices that go beyond the purview of design itself but which I consider to be equally, if not more fruitful avenues for working towards a way out of zugzwang.

Of note here is that I do not see any of the critiques I will make about game design and the games discussed in this chapter as reasons to abandon the *work* of designing games with desired messages or arguments altogether. In the case of games which combat exhaustion in particular, my stance is quite the opposite. While I will argue that one of game design's more pervasive approaches (i.e. claiming to design *for* an ideal rather than *towards* it) does more harm than good in addressing the exhausting status quo, to make a game in this way does not bar it from being taken up as part of a larger social justice movement.¹⁸⁰ And let us not forget that the more games that are designed *towards* ideals of equity or dismantling oppression, the more widely these ideas will be circulated and the more likely it is that players do internalize some aspect of such values.

Although it is true in this specific context that I see the "work" of play as more promising than the work of design, I want to be clear from the outset that I still believe that the work of game design ought not to be taken lightly or worse, ever framed as apolitical. There is a great critical potential in the creation of games, just as there is in any other work of art.

Having spent much of the last two chapters describing the ways that games and game design perpetuate zugzwang and keep hegemony intact, my chief aim in what follows is to account

¹⁸⁰ This is true for a number of reasons, not the least of which are those which relate to the player's ability to repurpose a game for any number of ends, will of course be discussed in Chapter 5. Ironically, the only titles I would really be skeptical of are exceedingly didactic *serious games* - those titles which have been created with a very particular argument in mind such that, while they do not *prevent* critical reflection on the part of players, they certainly do less to incentivize it than more open-ended play experiences.

for the ways that game design intervenes and may yet intervene this process, particularly by reframing our dominant sense of what leisure time is *for*. While theories of game making present many concrete procedures and toolkits through which designers can purportedly build games that *do* a specific thing, I will show that such didactic game design makes many promises and takes much for granted that cannot reasonably be guaranteed. Instead, I argue that the way we write game design theory and the way we make games should embrace a language of designing *towards* a set of intentions or ideals, since this is all one can reliably do. We will leave the more agentic language for Chapter 5 and our discussion of play and players.

4.3- Designing a Discipline

4.3.1 - The Fraught Procedures of Proceduralism

Game studies at large has been concerned with the relationship between player and designer for some time.¹⁸¹ In *Persuasive Games* (2007), Bogost puts forth the concept of procedural rhetoric to describe “the practice of authoring arguments through processes” that many have come to see as endemic to game design (29). Indeed, the influence of this concept when applied to the coded rules of a game is difficult to deny. That designers might be able to *push* or at least *strongly coax* players through an argument or experience has proven to be an attractive idea for scholars and designers alike.¹⁸² As Bogost’s book rose to prominence, other works of game design theory soon emerged that expanded upon this text to make more specific arguments for what one can do or convey with or through video games.¹⁸³

One example can be found in Isbister’s *How Games Move Us* (2016) which argues that “games can actually play a powerful role in creating empathy¹⁸⁴ and other strong, positive

¹⁸¹ See Nissenbaum and Flanagan, 2014 and Treanor and Mateas, 2013, for examples not considered here.

¹⁸² As well as many would-be funding sources. Though I do not have the space or anything beyond personal empirical data to support this at this time, the role of granting agencies in the prevalence of this school of design (and the ubiquity of this way of framing games in game design programs generally) is likely quite significant.

¹⁸³ See also Laff 2007.

¹⁸⁴ For strong critiques of empathy games see Pozo (2018) and Polanski (2019).

emotional experiences” (Isbister, 2016, p. xvii). By going through major tenets of game design such as meaningful choice and player sociality, she offers the reader “a more nuanced and detailed appreciation for how games move players emotionally” (p. 132). Similarly, we may recall that Flanagan’s *Critical Play* encourages designers and players alike¹⁸⁵ to “create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life” (Flanagan, 2009, p.6). She argues that “this culture of play [...] is one in which participants find a space for permission, experimentation, and subversion” and suggests that by designing for critical play, games can give players transformative experiences (p. 13). For Flanagan, as for Isbister, Bogost, and others from “the proceduralist school”, these claims rest on the idea that games are systems of rules that the player necessarily enacts through their play (Sicart, 2011, para. 9). My sense is that since these texts are written with designers in mind, the question is never *if* one can express arguments through design, but only *how to go about it*.

Throughout this chapter, I will refer to this relation as *the problem of design*. I frame the issue in this way: if there is to be any theory of making games at all, then it has to assume that game design choices will impact how a player interacts with a given game. This is likely a self-evident point. However, once this logic is applied to a specific goal, and particularly when that goal is emancipatory, critical reflection, I am less convinced that a top-down relationship between designer and player, wherein one dispenses meaning to the other, is an effective way forward. Through the figure of the ‘imagined’ or ‘ideal’ player who acts out a games processes in predetermined ways, there is a troubling slippage here between viewing games as a set of processes within which players are given certain abilities and barred from others in service of a critical, curated experience and the mind-numbing character of Enlightenment in which “the process is always decided from the start” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944, p. 24). Much design

¹⁸⁵ The subtext here being that design itself is a form of play, something we will discuss at the end of this chapter.

theory, whether intentionally or not, assumes this deficit model in which the designer must teach the player *how to think*.¹⁸⁶

Such a didactic framing of design as a practice which wholly determines the actions of a player is not something that is unique to devotees of proceduralism. Even approaches which seem more wholistic at first can be hard-pressed to dispense with the preconceived notion that there exists a knowledge deficit between game makers and game players which the former will solve through design. One of the better examples for my purposes is Khaled's (2018) "reflective game design" (p. 4). Stemming from the work of Sengers et al (2005) and other design scholars cited above, Khaled argues that designing for reflection is a way to intervene in the thoughtless flow state of mainstream game design while also avoiding the trap of definitive answers offered by many so-called serious games of the proceduralist school. And yet, to do so she must still make strong claims about what reflection *is* and what it is *for*.

For instance, when Khaled writes that designers "create reflective experiences for their players" this implies that players are not always-already reflecting on their play (2018, p. 16). While my preceding analysis of *Stardew Valley* and flow supports Khaled's claim that "many of the characteristic tropes of mainstream games work at cross purposes to reflection," I would never claim that such play occurs thoughtlessly (p. 21).¹⁸⁷ And when she concludes that reflective game

¹⁸⁶ Which, of course stands in stark contrast to theories of Hall, Barthes, or De Certeau that were discussed in the Introduction. There are also a number of design theorists who push back against these ideas, but as I have noted above, these are not the dominant models of how design works – from my own experiences teaching courses on games, I have seen many undergraduate students frame design questions as questions of how to "make" the player do *x*.

¹⁸⁷ Not directly related to Khaled's work, but this line of thought put me on a tangent: Like our repeated observation about the privilege of access to leisure, we might equally discuss the privilege of access to interpretation here. Whose critical engagements with a given work of design (or art) are treated as valid and whose are not? What foreknowledge is required to make such engagement permissible? I see a similar tension in the work of the Situationists which claims to engage in a conversation with participants/users while still assuming that these individuals have the requisite knowledge to 'get' what is at play (See Debord 1967 or Bourriaud 1998). I am also reminded of the story of an art installation by Ai Weiwei that consisted of him smashing a vase. When a protestor entered the exhibition and smashed one themselves, they were arrested, and the artist spoke against their act (Madigan, 2014). This tension is similar to the one I identified in Wark's figure of the well-read gamer theorist and I argue that it is pervasive (in a different form) in writing

design results in the creation of playable experiences that “demand active interpretation from their players” I ask who is to measure the success of someone’s interpretation and who is culpable should the message not be properly received (p. 24). Recalling what I said in relation to flow and *Stardew Valley*, what is one doing when disrupting the capital-F Flow state if not substituting it with another flow which must be held to the same scrutiny? While emphasizing reflection in one’s design methodology is clearly something worth undertaking, there are many assumptions made in the text which undercut this sentiment.

Ultimately, the tension I see in these framings of design as disruption is perhaps best exemplified by Flanagan’s “critical play process,” one component of which is to “design for subversion of the system” as a way of allowing other forms of play to emerge (Flanagan, 2009, p. 257; 258). Here I ask whether subverting a system that has been *designed to be subverted* is subversive at all or whether it is an example of what Menkman calls the domestication of the glitch, whereby “it has lost the radical basis of its enchantment and becomes predictable” (2011, p. 55). While I will discuss the critical potential of the glitch below, here I note a troubling similarity between the domestication of a glitch and Safiya Noble’s discussion of how systemic algorithmic bias is often dismissed as “glitches” that are framed as “one-off moments” rather than indications that “the organizing logics of the web could be broken” (2018, p. 6).¹⁸⁸ To capture the glitch (subversion) within a design is to deprive it of what makes it a glitch (subversive) and this carries us into territory where the blurring of accident and intent are readily problematized.¹⁸⁹ This is not

around art games and other practices grounded in specialized knowledge (such as those discussed in Galloway, 2006 and Schleiner, 2017).

¹⁸⁸ This has ties to Fiske’s work on incorporation and the ways that popular culture absorbs counterculture.

¹⁸⁹ This is the sort of discussion that could unravel into the absurd quite quickly, so I have opted to clarify here rather than in the text itself: within the framework of a designer creating a system for users, the notion of creating explicit opportunities for subversion strikes me as an oxymoron because the moment a subversion is *designed*, it is therefore *accounted for* and can no longer be subverting anything from a designer’s perspective. The way one determines whether something is/is not a glitch is relative to the design of the system – on a larger project a low-level programmer could hide a glitch somewhere in the code for one reason or another, but this individual decision is distinct from the overarching design decision to *make* a game with glitches. The moment that the explicit intent of a particular design choice is to be a glitch, it immediately ceases to be one. For more on this, see the end of this chapter.

to mention the fact that even a text that was somehow designed to be subverted, could still be undercut in unintended ways.¹⁹⁰

While I have no doubt that Khaled and Flanagan's writings both emerge out of ideals that are similar to those of this dissertation, my point is that, when couched in didactic design logics, even the idea of dismantling the dominant flow and encouraging critical thinking is framed as something that a designer sets up and a player seamlessly receives, which is a disingenuous framing of how play actually occurs that erases the agency of players.

One of the ways that I consider each of the games discussed below as oriented towards radical slowness is that each challenges the player to reflect critically on the norms and assumptions of neoliberal capitalism. If one is seeking such an invitation to pause, then they may heed it and a moment of radical slowness may emerge. It is one thing to suggest that these games present ideas for the player's consideration and quite another to suggest that these games *make* the player *think critically*. All play involves critical reflection, but when one's ability to convert that into action is hampered by exhaustion, then it is clear that games and game design must move beyond the question of how to instill values in a player and instead ask whether it is possible to address the values of the larger system.

4.3.2 - Proceeding Onward

All of this is not to say that I view the above game design literature as a bold-faced propaganda tool for conserving the status quo. There are a number of reasons that much of the writing of this sort assumes the existence of an ideal player who follows design decisions to their logical conclusion at every turn. From a practical standpoint, for instance, many works on game

¹⁹⁰ See Ruberg (2020) on the fraught queerness of speedrunning queer games. In my MA research, I interviewed many speedrunners and asked about what formal elements should go into designing a game "for speedrunning" and other than some quality of life suggestions like skippable cutscenes and a reliable in-game timer, my interviewees all agreed that to design a game *with it being broken open and played faster than expected in mind* was a poor approach at best.

design are written as handbooks of fundamentals.¹⁹¹ I cannot imagine that texts such as these would get much mileage out of refusing an instructional style and instead insisting that all designs are fragile, mutable things which can easily be played or interpreted incorrectly or that the idea of conveying meaning or achieving a desired effect cannot be guaranteed.

Put simply, a handbook of game design which stewes in the messiness of the fact that games are fragile works and will inevitably be misconstrued or played “wrong” is not as practically useful as one which deconstructs game design into more readily assailable chunks and helps one actually get their game made. While the advice to ‘let go of your creation’ once it is out in the world is as useful for game designers as it is for any artists, it is not a de-facto step in the game development pipeline. Further, from a more academic standpoint, we cannot ignore the fact that many scholar-practitioners need to seek out funding for their research and prototypes and that the language of grant-writing requires that one frame their research as novel and revolutionary. Much writing on design is therefore goal-oriented and overdetermined out of necessity.

To be clear, then, this *problem of design* is not something that I believe we ought to actively to attempt to “solve.” What I am discussing here is arguably fundamental to so much of what we consider to be the practice of making games that it is unclear whether a solution exists at all (short of dismantling the larger system which makes such framings of design necessary and profitable). Rather, it is my contention both in this chapter and in general that an awareness and understanding of the problem is what matters most if we are to consider game design as a tool for combatting exhaustion.

While certain power relations that exist between the designer and players cannot be eliminated, many of the issues caused by this dynamic can be mitigated through care and self-

¹⁹¹ See Swink (2008), or Rogers (2010), for example. Here again we may think to the way that game design (and only game design, not critique or theory) has become a hot commodity in the American university. UC Irvine’s own game design curriculum has more theory than I would assume the average program of its ilk, but it is nonetheless certainly oriented towards preparing students for industry jobs.

reflexivity. For examples of this, we might look to alternative design methodologies such as player-centered design (Linehan et al, 2015) or, as we will see in the case of *Walden, a game*, we might embrace the theoretical and methodological implications inherent in framing games as playable “experiences” rather than rule-based arguments or empathy machines (Fullerton, 2019, p. 334). An awareness of *the problem of design* brings with it the realization that there are as many roads leading away from didactic game design as there are leading towards it.

With all of this established, we are now ready to move from a discussion of game design theory into one of specific designs which variously evoke slowness, criticality, and (re)generation. I will note that to do so, I conduct my analyses in a way that privileges a top-down perspective rather than accounting for the fullest range of actions a player might take since authorial intent is not something I am willing to dismiss even as I critique theories of design which deem it immutable. Although I argue for a widespread distancing from didactic design approaches, the fact remains a reading of these games’ politics is best achieved by basing the foundations of my analysis on what gameplay possibilities are made most explicit. Once an initial sketch is developed in this way, then we may pry at these designs more deliberately and assess the extent to which they are able to dismantle zugzwang by design.

4.4 – Playing Emotional Labour

4.4.1 – Actions Speak Louder Than (Kind) Words

We begin again with *Kind Words*. Due to the deeply personal and sometimes sensitive subject matter being shared by players, it is unsurprising that Popcannibal put a number of safety measures into place as part of the game’s design. Players’ notes are largely anonymized with only a first initial ever being associated with anything a player writes. This initial is chosen by the player and has no need to correspond to any real-world moniker. As well, a person who posts a note can then only read any replies they receive. There is no option to reply in turn and begin a longer correspondence and given that there are only twenty-six possible ways that a note can be signed, it

is effectively impossible to carry on a lasting conversation with another player. Finally, as one may note in the screenshots shared in Section 4.1, there is a 'Report' button that players may click while reading other players' notes. While I had initially assumed that it served only to flag derogatory or otherwise offensive content written by trolls and other bad actors, clicking on the button reveals that, among other things, posts can also be flagged as 'worrying' should the well-being of the author ever come into question.

In this sense, Crawford's assertions around video games and safety are complicated and even contradicted by *Kind Words*. While the game creates a space to ask questions that may be harmful to the asker if they were posed in other contexts, it is doubtless true that asking and even reading certain questions may still pose risks to those who interact with the game. Here I am reminded of the role-playing concept of "bleed" which refers to a player making a "choice of character actions based on personal relationships/interactions" from their own life (Care Boss, 2007). Bowman notes that "the impact of bleed experiences can become quite intense for some individuals" and so she advocates for "learning strategies to help individuals recover who feel emotionally overwhelmed or confused after a game is done" (2015, para. 18). While players of *Kind Words* are of course not expected to post questions "in character", the conversations that have occurred in role-playing communities around the concept of bleed are nonetheless useful for understanding the risks of any sort of play in which players surface their lived experiences and how such experiences may be handled with care.

For instance, much has been written and many mechanics and devices have been created to help players manage risk in role-playing environments. One notable example is John Stavropoulos' "X-Card," a tool "that allows anyone in your game (including you) to edit out any content anyone is uncomfortable with as you play" (Stavropoulos, n.d. para.3). Before any session that employs the X-Card, players are invited to lift or tap the card (usually a literal index card with an 'X' drawn on it) to move the conversation immediately and unquestioningly away from whatever is presently being

discussed. In this sense, the tool represents an adaptable way of helping players feel safe quickly and without the need for further elaboration.

Beyond this specific tool, there are also larger conversations around *lines* (“a hard limit, something we do not want to cross”) and *veils* (“a ‘pan away’ or ‘fade to black’ moment [...] a way to still deal with certain themes while avoiding having to describe them in graphic detail”) which a play group can agree upon in advance and continue to modulate as play progresses in the name of avoiding triggering or traumatic subject matter (Alex P, 2020, para. 1).¹⁹² While these systems can be difficult to navigate and bad actors can always push back against them, these efforts indicate an admission that playing with the personal can be difficult and that work should be done to mitigate the risks of such play.

In *Kind Words*, however, the range of notes one receives is not controlled by the player. From what I can tell, there is (at the time of writing) no way to filter out specific words or content. Beyond that, supposing one is comfortable reading notes about particularly difficult subject matter, a player’s exact recourse if they encounter someone who appears to be in a dangerous situation or at risk of harming themselves or others is not wholly clear. While tagging a message as ‘worrisome’ may lead to Popcannibal contacting relevant authorities, moments such as these show the very hard limits on which forms of care are made possible between strangers on a platform of this nature.

In speaking of the motivation to create this game, Ziba Scott (one of the developers) said, “we are doing what we can to give people a positive place to receive comfort, exercise empathy, and to witness how much need there is for kindness. *Kind Words* is meant to feel good, but it’s not escapism. It’s about healing yourself and others” (Hernandez, 2019, para. 12). When I first read this, I found it to be a disappointing, if unsurprising statement. *Kind Words* is a game which tacitly acknowledges that the contemporary moment is one rife with anxieties that are best not faced

¹⁹² See also Alder (2017).

alone. However, by leaving it at that and presenting a tool for users to ‘self-medicate’ with one another, the game still says little about the systemic issues that cause these social ills, nor does it offer any way of altering the status quo.

As Scott said elsewhere in the same interview, this was apparently a conscious choice: “On a national stage, people are being wildly cruel, [...] America has a racist President and is putting children in concentration camps. We could make games directly on those topics, but they would likely only preach to the choir...” (para. 12). The prevailing logic here seems to have been that making a game about the troubled politics of our time was a less worthwhile undertaking than creating a game about making do within and despite these systemic issues – to make a game *for* exhausted people without it being *about* exhaustion itself. And while I ultimately believe that this game represents a good faith effort to create a space that allows individuals to support one another in some small way, the limitations to this project are a discouraging reflection of the state of the world and the hopes many have for actually changing it.

At its best, *Kind Words* facilitates the creation of virtual support networks, but there are serious constraints to this support. Through its (arguably necessary) choices to keep communications limited and anonymous and through its invocation of lo-fi comfort and the power of kindness, I argue that Popcannibal’s work embodies the video game equivalent of palliative care with regards to the exhausting status quo. Warm sentiments from a stranger on the Internet have their emotional and psychological benefits, of course. However, the *comfort* of positive vibes and being told to hang in there will not rescue someone from material danger or from systemic precarity and *Kind Words* does not appear to have any interest in speaking to these larger issues. In this sense, I believe that the game represents an understandable, if lamentably fatalistic, response to the feeling of being trapped in zugzwang. Even so, I situate the game here rather than in the previous chapter because *Kind Words* does admittedly do something, however implicitly, to work against hegemonic norms that prop up deplete us.

Recalling the work of Lora Mathis discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, *Kind Words*' emphasis on expressing oneself and speaking through difficult feelings arguably qualifies it as a radically soft piece of software which does the work of "recognizing the power in vulnerability and repainting the image of strength" (Mathis, 2016). In so doing, the game facilitates players giving and receiving kindness in a controlled environment that tacitly rejects the idea that it is every person for themselves. And while teaching kindness and care is vital, so too is dismantling the system which discourages solidarity at every turn, and this is a step in the process that Popcannibal shies away from but which Mathis and other practitioners of radical softness do not.

In short, while *Kind Words* goes further than other wholesome games by acknowledging exhaustion and the (re)generative power of communities of care, the game nonetheless stops short of mobilizing its community beyond itself. This is particularly unfortunate since the serious (albeit limited) emotional labour required of any who play *Kind Words* (or practice communal care in general) is ultimately downplayed, reduced to "just some kind words".

4.4.2 – Remunerating the Radically Soft in *The Truly Terrific Travelling Troubleshooter*

In contrast, Handsome Foxes in Vests' *The Truly Terrific Travelling Troubleshooter* (hitherto shortened to *5T*) is a game which asks "what would happen if emotional labour were valued as it should be — as in, the same way we value other labour" (n.d., para. 6). *5T* is a "physical-digital hybrid roleplaying game" played by two players, each of whom adopts a role – "the Troubleshooter," a suitcase-toting graduate from the Institute of Emotional Labour, and "the Customer" who has come to them with a problem that they want help solving (para. 7). Play consists of a conversation between the Troubleshooter and the Customer. Through the use of written prompts, the Troubleshooter encourages the Customer to open up about a problem and then, through active listening, repeats their sense of those troubles back to the Customer.

Next, the Troubleshooter and Customer negotiate a form of payment for the Troubleshooter's services that seems suitable to both players. Then, the Troubleshooter gets to

work with their SUITCASE (Suitcase Unit Intended to Cure All Sorts of Emotions), a small valise that is full of soft, plush objects with sensors (See Fig. 26). Squeezing the various objects in the case prompts short audio clips with pieces of advice to play over the Troubleshooter's headphones. Based on these clips, the Troubleshooter assembles a set of potential solutions the Customer may take to ease their troubles. The Customer may then decide whether they feel their service was adequate and payment (represented by a drawing of the agreed upon fee on a slip of paper) is rendered, signaling the end of play.



Fig. 26 – Promotional image of the game's logo and the SUITCASE.

Based on their shared interest in talking out one's troubles and giving/receiving advice, the immediate ties between this game and *Kind Words* are clear. Beyond this, although *5T* is self-described as a role-playing game, it seems likely that players real-life experiences will 'bleed' into gameplay to an extent that approaches the total transparency of *Kind Words*. Neither the character of the Troubleshooter nor of the Customer are at all predetermined beyond the basic roles that they play in the conversation and the interactions with the SUITCASE. Nor is there any rule dictating the problem that the Customer chooses to bring into the conversation. The short, open-ended nature of the game's prompts ("Think of a time when an animal understood you better than a human ever could," for example) push players to improvise a large amount of the conversation allowing all the more room for various facets of one's lived experiences to enter into the game even if one's chosen

problem is intentionally distanced from any real-life concerns. While there is not the same anonymity at play in *5T*, then, players are still fully capable of having conversations in which the distinction between ‘playing at’ and actually doing emotional labour are heavily blurred.

While I drew the parallel between *Kind Words* and the concept of radical softness myself, Handsome Foxes in Vests has made Mathis’ connection to their work explicit:

All the objects within the suitcase are handmade with soft materials and connected to a digital interface. The combination of a hard-shell suitcase with the soft innards that form the core of the game is a physical metaphor for radical softness and feelings. Softness, yielding, vulnerability, cuteness and other traditionally feminized traits are often associated with weakness, and in a culture that valorizes strength, having a thick skin, stoicism, logic over affect, and other “masculinized” traits, being soft is a radical act.

(para. 8)

Here the physical make-up of the game itself is emblematic of Mathis’ challenge to the hegemonic imperative to conceal one’s emotions. Through this explicit theoretical tie and the clearly organized phases of gameplay, *5T* suggests that it is not only emotions which are undervalued or discouraged in the contemporary moment, but also the labour of monitoring and regulating one’s own emotions and those of others.¹⁹³

Based on this, I argue that Marcotte and Squinkifer have also designed *towards* a politic of radical slowness. While a full game of *5T* would only likely last one hour, the game seems tuned to giving players pause to reflect on exactly what goes into the emotional labour of listening to and supporting another person. This moment of pause, of interruption to the taking for granted of care work is in effect a break in the flow of received, hegemonic norms. Even the act of hyper-compartmentalizing each step of what would normally be a seemingly shapeless conversation does work by revealing how complex and multifaceted the work of attending to one another really is.

¹⁹³ Labour which is often borne by minoritized individuals. From Leventry (2020): “When you are a marginalized person, specifically one who advocates and teaches as part of your work in order to elevate civil rights, the collision of the layered meanings behind emotional labor means two significant things: We are paid to take on the ignorance and sometimes purposeful bigotry of those we speak in front of during trainings and classes and we are expected to provide free guidance to family and friends in the name of love and allyship” (para 5).

Kind Words arguably succeeds at this as well to an extent since the implicit realness of the subject matter and character limit on one's notes likely incentivizes choosing one's words carefully. However, as we have now seen, not all attempts at radical slowness are intentional, nor are they created equal.

The play of *5T*, from the discussion of appropriate payment (as the designers note, "everyone's gotta eat, and under the capitalist kyriarchy, no one can afford to work for free") to the carefully laid-out procedure of how advice is given and received, invites players to imagine "a queer, intersectional feminist world where emotional labor is valued and technology is soft and used for care" (Handsome Foxes in Vests, n.d. para. 4; Marcotte, 2018, para. 31).¹⁹⁴ Although Popcannibal goes beyond asking players to 'imagine' a caring space and instead attempts to create one themselves in *Kind Words*, they run up against a number of design limitations that *5T* is able to circumvent through a more speculative approach to what care *could* look like were it not for the profit-driven, neoliberal logic that presently governs what 'counts' as work worth doing.¹⁹⁵

Even so, no design is without its limits. Unlike *Kind Words*, *5T* is a hybrid game, meaning that it has a number of analog elements. Unlike a fully digital game in which at least some rules of engagement are enforced by lines of code,¹⁹⁶ the players are their own auditors here. In many ways, this is a strength of the design since it allows players to carefully negotiate the level of bleed they wish to bring to their play, or what other safety mechanisms they might want to implement.¹⁹⁷ However (and this is an issue that is fundamental to all design which is perhaps more stark in analog contexts), there is no way to guarantee that the game will be played properly or even that playing as intended will always lead to players reflecting on radical softness. However *5T* still

¹⁹⁴ I juxtapose these quotes both due to their compatibility but also because Marcotte is in fact one half of the *5T* design team alongside Dietrich Squinkifer.

¹⁹⁵ Or, recalling earlier chapters, the work which gives one the moral authority to enjoy leisure time.

¹⁹⁶ Though beyond the purview of the present discussion, my own work on *implicit vs explicit* rules informs my thinking here (Scully-Blaker, 2014).

¹⁹⁷ I cannot fully explain this, but I do feel that *5T's* grounding in role play loses out on something that *Kind Words* is able to achieve through its handling of real-world problems, bleed notwithstanding.

strikes me as less didactic than serious, proceduralist games, and more at peace with gesturing towards ideals that players may not pursue.

Even overtly radical designs such as this are only as effective as the players enable them to be. And while I by no means wish to suggest that this is a reason to stop trying to design games that threaten the status quo, it will ultimately serve as one reason why I believe that greater attention ought to be paid to the (re)generative nature play itself, rather than situating it in any specific (and therefore mutable) context.

Both *Kind Words* and *5T* are examples of designs which address the exhaustion of the status quo. While *Popcannibal*'s hub for epistolary care implicitly values softness and openness through its lo-fi aesthetic and its desire that no one feel alone, the development team's concern with prioritizing the comfort offered by emotional support without organizing it into something more prevents the title from being explicitly radical. In contrast, *5T* directly invokes Mathis' ideas and its gameplay insists that players stop and reflect on the labour of maintaining oneself and others through 'reproductive' care work that runs afoul of dominant notions of capitalist productivity.

Recalling *Weeks*, *Kind Words* gestures to the exhausting status quo by offering ways that we might 'make do' within it or, at its best, *reform* how we treat kindness and care. Meanwhile, *5T* identifies a form of work we are so often forced to neglect due to our exhaustion and invites players to *revert* against such normative framings of emotions and care by codifying them as vital, remediated labour. In doing so, I argue that *Handsome Foxes in Vests* stalls the business of the dominant through its design, even if the exact shape of player engagement with the game cannot be perfectly predicted or guaranteed. To better explain what I mean by this, I now wish to introduce a set of concepts which resonate not only with the above examples, but with this chapter's larger conversation around the 'problem' of design.

4.4.3 - *Queer, Glitchy Failures and the Problem of Design*

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed invokes Heidegger to explore the fact that “objects do not only do what we intend them to do” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 47). For her, this speaks to a key difference between “using something and perceiving something,” the latter of which only tends to occur at the moment of breakdown, of *failure* (p. 47). The moment that an object (Ahmed’s example is a hammer) ceases “to be a means to do something” and “becomes the object that we attend to”¹⁹⁸, it “is perceived as having properties” which are “revealed” to the user in the moment of breakdown (i.e. this hammer is broken, or this hammer is too heavy) (p. 48). This has a number of implications for Ahmed, but there are two in particular that are relevant here: (i) “intention should not then become a presumed property of things” and (ii) “The moment of ‘non-use’” is the moment in which “objects may be judged insofar as they are inadequate to a task, the moment we ‘blame the tool’” (p. 49). While the former point reinforces what has already been discussed in relation to critiques of the proceduralists, I want to focus on this latter point now.

The notion that the moment of disuse is also the moment in which a particular object or technology becomes judged is echoed by Star and Bowker’s (2006) work on infrastructure, one of the key characteristics of which is that its breakdown “opens the taken-for-granted” to our scrutiny (p. 230). However, I am equally reminded of Menkman’s definition of the glitch as “a not yet defined¹⁹⁹ break from a procedural flow, fostering critical potential” (Menkman, 2011, p.27). It is, in other words a moment of failure that “captures the machine revealing itself” (p. 30). Recalling what was said above about the domestication of the glitch, this is a very delicate state to manage, but one that is immensely helpful in the context of this dissertation. This sense of the glitch as a

¹⁹⁸ There is an interesting tie to care here, but I have little more to say than that at this time.

¹⁹⁹ Menkman’s use of “not yet” here is somewhat the opposite of Juul’s in that, theoretically the glitch wants to avoid definition for as long as possible, lest it become what she calls *domesticated*.

simultaneous interruption and revelation can be said to act in direct opposition to the flow state through a slowing, or outright halting, of the seamless movement of business as usual.²⁰⁰

The importance of the glitch becomes fully realized if we extend this idea from a given object to the larger sociopolitical values of everyday life. Since we only begin to question the use of something in the moment that is no longer usable, then things that are working as intended, *even if that work is the development and perpetuation of systemic oppression*, go undetected by all except those marginalized bodies for whom the system *does not work from the start*.²⁰¹ Since breakdown is a state in which a system *reveals* its underlying operations, it is therefore vital that as many people as possible are made to see the ways the present system is broken, especially if they are normally shielded from this revelation by privilege or even exhaustion. With that moment of recognition comes the ability to judge the status quo ‘inadequate to the task’ of supporting our way life.

This is my ultimate hope for game design as a force for combatting exhaustion: *If there is a reliable way to spark such recognition in enough people while also restoring to them the energy necessary to act upon this realization, then perhaps the system itself can become the ‘object we attend to’ so that it can better attend to all of us*.²⁰²

And while Ahmed and others have spoken of the dangers inherent in opposing the status quo, given all we have said of games as both cultural object and operational logic, I argue that video games are a (relatively) safer way of playing within and against hegemonic norms in ways that can ultimately inform similar action in society at large. For example, asking players to confront the devaluing of emotional labour and systematizing how it ought to be undertaken and compensated, *5T* acts as a glitch, a ludic interruption, revelation, and critique of the taken-for-

²⁰⁰ This property of the glitch reminds me of Virilio’s Museum of Accidents (1986), which is not surprising considering Menkman’s engagement with his work.

²⁰¹ Noble calls out these intentional glitches in her work.

²⁰² There is something to be said here about the emerging discourses around the difference between being an ally and an accomplice, the latter of which “goes beyond [the former] to advocacy” (Schafranek, 2021, para. 3).

granted nature of care work. Marcotte and Squinkifer insist that emotional labour be rendered visible by making the players question why it is not visible already.

We might go further and argue that reading both *5T* and *Kind Words* as reaching for a politic of radical slowness is also a justification for reading both games as potential glitches in hegemonic norms. Rather than stopping to smell the roses as one might in a wholesome game, these titles invite players to stop and reflect on the needs of others as well as the nature of care itself. And while part of the work of this chapter continues to be demonstrating the glitch is not something that is readily compatible with the practice of design, I still wish to suggest that making games which contradict, or even reveal hegemony is a worthwhile undertaking, even if (re)generation remains elusive. With that said, we are now ready to move to our next pair of games, both of whose slowness and invitations to critical reflection are arguably more overt.

4.5 - Pondering Life and Reflecting on Death

4.5.1 - Death and Taxes in A Mortician's Tale

Released in 2017 by Laundry Bear Games, *A Mortician's Tale* puts players in the role of Charlie, a young woman who has just begun a new job as a funeral director at the small, family-run Rose and Daughters Funeral Home. Gameplay consists of guiding Charlie through a series of non-consecutive days which are segmented into three parts, each with its own gameplay style: *reading and replying to emails, preparing corpses, and attending funerals.*

Unlike more open-ended experiences like *5T*, *A Mortician's Tale* is not a game about allowing the player to craft their own story and this is made clear from the first moments of gameplay. Most of the narrative is imparted through reading Charlie's emails. Players glean details about her life and the day's work through regular correspondences with several friends and coworkers and learn about the work of being a mortician through a newsletter. There are few instances in which the player can 'reply' to an email and even those moments consist of clicking a

button to fill in a pre-written response.²⁰³ Charlie's character is not informed by the player's choices, rather the player learns who Charlie is and what she values through how her correspondents refer to her and bring up past events (most of which happen on days that are "off-camera") and sometimes through what other tabs she has open in her browser. Once the player has read through their messages, they may click a button contained within the email about the day's client to begin the next stage of their day.

Preparation of the corpse for the funeral and eventual interment is the most mechanically dense segment of the day. The game is very deliberate in teaching the player about every step of the process, from washing and shaving the body to distributing embalming fluid, guiding the player through each step with careful instructions of how to use each tool through a set of precise mouse movements (See Fig. 27).

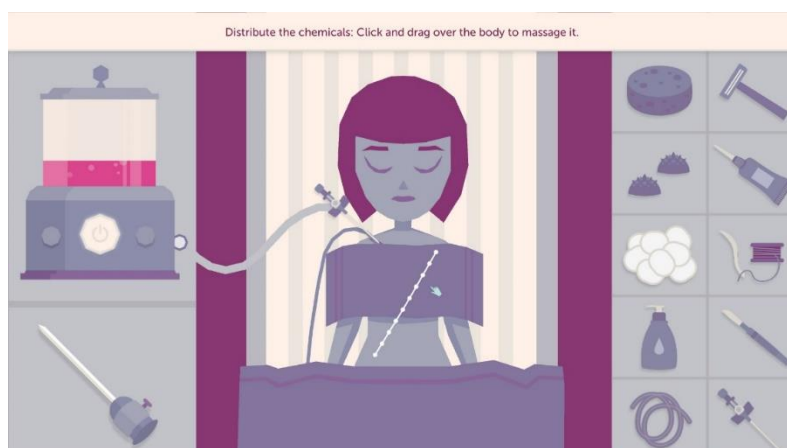


Fig. 27 – An example of preparing a body in A Mortician's Tale. Players must manually pick up and drop each tool from the menu on the right and use them as instructed before the day can progress.

While the exact set of tools required each day can vary, there are some steps that must always be completed and regardless of how far into the game the player progresses, there are always instructions reminding the player of the order in which each task must be completed. This daily ritual, coupled with an art style featuring muted tones and a lack of any "gory" details suggests that

²⁰³ Most of the time, there is only one choice of response available - generally an assertion that Charlie is ready to get to work. In instances where content may be triggering (eg. suicide), however, the player is given two choices, whether to opt in to the content or whether to opt out.

the emphasis here is on mindfully attending to the deceased and perhaps reflecting on larger questions about the nature of death and of working with death. These thoughts are only amplified when the preparation of the body is complete, and the player moves to the third and final phase of the day.

With her day's physical labour complete, Charlie then moves on to the reception hall at the funeral home and mingles among the mourners (See Fig. 28). As was the case with her emails, the player is never given the choice to respond to anything that the various attendees say. Instead, the player may click on each person to read their dialogue bubble, which may variously represent lines said to Charlie, to another mourner, to the departed loved one, or to no one in particular. The player must also click on the pedestal that displays the coffin or urn and offer a slow, reverent bow to the deceased before clicking on the door to leave. Unlike the daily emails, the interest here is not in what Charlie thinks, but rather how each death leaves behind the lives of others who all have their own feelings in response to the loss. Mourners may share their memories of the deceased or speculate as to whether they would have liked the décor of the room or even the idea of having a formal funeral service at all. Once the player leaves the memorial, the day ends with little fanfare, and another begins.



Fig. 28 – An example of attending a memorial service in *A Mortician's Tale*. The player is able to “speak” with each attendee, although many do not talk directly to Charlie, instead reminiscing about the deceased or speculating on what they would have felt wanted, as is the case here.

These daily cycles serve as the backdrop for *A Morticians Tale's* overarching plot. After a while, Charlie receives an email from the owner of Rose and Daughters informing everyone that the business is no longer profitable and so she was forced to sell it to a larger company, Hillside Heritage Enterprises Inc. With the change in management come many changes in Charlie's day-to-day operations, although admittedly few of these alter the gameplay itself. Charlie's boss in the first half of the game, a woman named Amy Rose, takes a gentler touch in her emailed instructions and always emphasizes respect for the deceased and the loved ones left behind. In contrast, Chad Grant, the CEO of Hillside Heritage, is much terser in his emails, reminding Charlie (who he calls Charlotte instead of her preferred nickname) that she must follow instructions exactly and that her work will be evaluated for compliance. In short order, Charlie also receives a new code of conduct which includes a mandatory uniform (particularly one that conceals Charlie's arm tattoos) and an insistence that employees always "consider the opportunity to upsell" clients on funerary services even these more costly options go against their initial wishes.

The corporatization of Charlie's workplace hits a thematic crescendo when, having taken on a contract from the city to "dispose of any unclaimed bodies," Chad Grant asks Charlie to cremate the remains of a "possibly homeless" man. While phases one and two of the day proceed as normal, when it comes time to attend the memorial, the player is shown a room with no occupants other than Charlie and the urn. The player can only have Charlie solemnly lower her head towards the deceased before leaving the room and ending the day.

Shortly thereafter the player receives an email from a friend and coworker (the hearse driver) stating that he is quitting and seeking new employment. Meanwhile, Charlie receives another email from Chad Grant reprimanding her for not upselling to a client (a choice Charlie makes "off-camera" without player input). All of this happens on the in-game date of April 9th, which otherwise proceeds as normal. The next and final in-game day, August 30th sees Charlie in a new office receiving congratulatory emails from all her friends for having opened Magnolia Forest, her

own funeral home and natural burial park that seeks to “empower families” through “a closer relationship with death and the dying process.” Players may also note that Magnolia Forest employs many of the more progressive funerary techniques described in *Funerals Monthly*, the series of newsletters that Charlie has received over the course of the game.

Like the tattoos that Charlie is forced to cover up when she starts working for Chad Grant, *A Mortician's Tale* wears its politics on its sleeve. Although we must look to interviews to confirm that Laundry Bear Games was directly inspired by mortician/author Caitlin Doughty and other members of The Order of the Good Death, one can see the Order's larger project of “trying to make death a bit less grim and a bit more normal” throughout the game (O'Connor, 2017, para. 4). The *Funerals Monthly* newsletter makes frequent references to more culturally sensitive and environmentally friendly business practices that a funeral home might take up, alongside broader lessons in etiquette and care when dealing with mourners.

In contrast, the cost-cutting, profit maximizing practices of Hillside Heritage would seem almost comically tasteless or evil were it not for the fact that in all likelihood many funeral homes operate in exactly this fashion. Given Charlie's “off-camera” actions and the values they imply, her leaving Hillside Heritage to found Magnolia Forest can only be read as a happy ending. In this sense, *A Mortician's Tale* puts the ugliness of capital on full display and invites the player to resist the sterilization of death through a slower, more mindful approach to dying that, like The Order of the Good Death, encourages one to accept one's inevitable passing and to cultivate a richer appreciation of life from that acceptance.

This is supported by the fact that there is never any time constraint placed on the player. Despite any prodding from Chad Grant, one may spend as much time reading their emails as they wish before beginning to prepare a body. There is also no gory fail state should the player move the scalpel off a predetermined dotted line, nor is there any way to a “better” or “worse” job in general. In a manner that recalls *Coffee Talk's* dialogue, each action can only be completed correctly, and the

game is content to wait for as long as it takes so that the player may learn the what and the why of each step in the process. Finally, while the player can click quickly through dialogue during the memorial service, these lines are written in such a way as to capture the full range of emotions one might feel at a funeral from misery to joy or even indifference. Players are therefore more likely to find NPCs whose dialogue resonates with them in ways that give one pause and invite further reflection on one's own views and experiences. However, as the striking memorial for an "unclaimed body" shows, this phase of gameplay can engender powerful moments even without any dialogue.

Despite these design decisions, I argue that the game ultimately falls short of effectively undoing exhaustion. My reasoning for this can be found in the game's ending. As noted above, Charlie always has an extra tab open in her browser while checking her emails. On the in-game day before she opens her own business, there is a tab open about the appropriate procedures for initiating such a process. If a player misses the detail of the extra tab, then the game's final day may come as a happy surprise. However, even including that extra tab, nowhere is there is any explanation of how Charlie has the finances necessary to start a company and acquire a workspace and clientele. While the cost of funerary services and of running such a business are central to the narrative's conflict (it is only when Rose and Daughters becomes insolvent that Hillside Heritage takes over), money is suddenly a non-factor when it comes to Charlie's ultimate triumph.

Like the barista in *Coffee Talk*, it seems here that money is not really an object for her, or at least not from the perspective of the player. As with other aspects of Charlie's life, this entire process of acquiring a small building and plot of land and becoming a small business owner takes place "off-camera" with no input or scrutiny from the player. This apparent gloss on the part of Laundry Bear is further emphasized by the fact that the player does not get to take part in any gameplay at Magnolia Forest. Since the events of the game are spurred on by Charlie's former

employer having to sell off the company due to running at a loss, it is curious that the player does not get any indication of how this new business will avoid the same fate.²⁰⁴

As a result, our happy ending relies simultaneously on laying bare and erasing the “business” of funerary labour, a contradiction that undercuts the game’s message and limits its ability to serve as a glitch in capitalist logics.²⁰⁵ Like *Kind Words*, the ending of *A Mortician’s Tale* disappointingly suggests that the best way of handling the toxicity of corporatization is to reform one’s relation to it²⁰⁶ rather than reshaping the system itself. By crafting a short, but clear narrative, *Laundry Bear* is able to efficiently impart a lot of information about the work of being a mortician and some of the larger debates in the funerary industry, but this comes at the expense of not giving the player any real say in the game’s events.

The next game I will discuss also tells a story that is bound to its main character, arguably more so since its protagonist was a real person. Even so, it offers a much wider range of gameplay choices to the player which create more opportunities for stillness and reflection while still advancing a clear politic that highlights many of the ills and the hypocrisies of living in a capitalist society.

4.5.2 – *Transcending Transcendentalism in Walden, a game*

Walden, a game was developed by Tracy Fullerton and the USC Game Innovation Lab and first released in 2017. In it, players take on the role of transcendentalist philosopher Henry David

²⁰⁴ While it may be true that the methods Charlie puts in place at Magnolia Forest are more cost effective since they do not require a crematorium or embalming fluid, given the game’s vocal critiques of the moral bankruptcy incentivized by capitalism, I would have expected some attention paid to how Charlie successfully escaped her circumstances.

²⁰⁵ It’s a shame but this has shades of the numerous articles about millennials who succeeded in purchasing their own homes – in nearly all instances someone claims to have “made it” despite what naysayers have claimed about the economy and then it always turns out their parents paid for the house. If we are to imagine that Charlie used her own savings to escape the problems caused by capitalism, then it is difficult to read the game’s ending as a satisfying escape.

²⁰⁶ Perhaps the game is not so crass as to suggest that Charlie *leans in* or becomes a *girlboss* but its gloss over the mechanisms of her happy ending do little to distance the overall message from these fraught neoliberal concepts.

Thoreau at the beginning of his famous 1845-47 'experiment' of living in a small cabin out in the woods that surround Walden Pond in rural Massachusetts. Per the game's website:

Players follow in [Thoreau's] footsteps, surviving in the woods by finding food and fuel and maintaining their shelter and clothing. At the same time, players are surrounded by the beauty of the woods and the Pond, which hold a promise of a sublime life beyond these basic needs. The game follows the loose narrative of Thoreau's first year in the woods, with each season holding its own challenges for survival and possibilities for inspiration.

(Fullerton, n.d.)

Notably, while a significant portion the gameplay is similar to other survival games in which gathering and maintaining resources is of primary concern, the player is never at risk of dying. Should any of Thoreau's 'needs' be depleted, he will "pass out" and then play will continue with little to no loss of progress. Further, as this description implies, alongside the four main survival resources – food, fuel, shelter, and clothing – there is a fifth, more subtle resource called inspiration. At any time, players may right click to 'inspect' the world, which causes their first-person perspective to zoom in. Should their view be centered on a relevant object, a textbox will pop up describing what the player is looking at with direct quotes from Thoreau himself and these aphorisms will also be added to the player's journal (See Fig. 29).

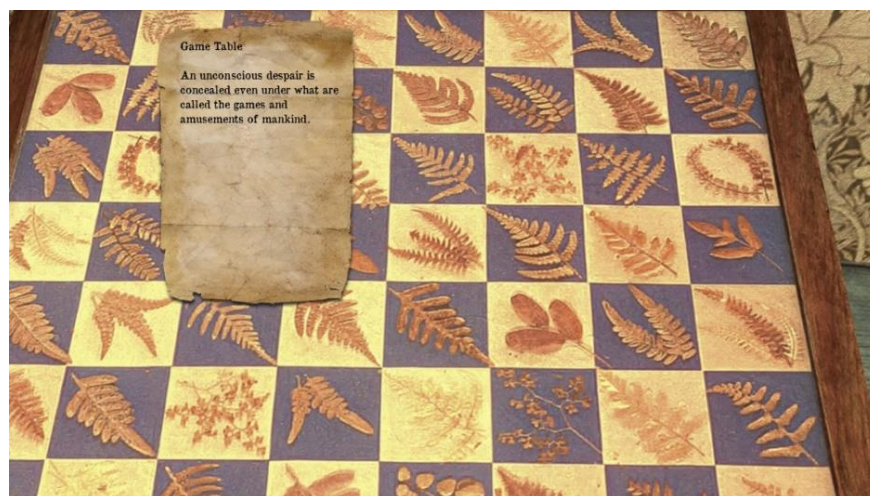


Fig. 29 – An example of what happens when closely inspecting one of the many things that the game deems worthy of note. The inscription reads, "Game Table: An unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind." No comment!

As one's inspiration climbs, the world's colours become noticeably more vibrant and the player is more easily able to spot the numerous arrowheads littered around Walden Pond (See Fig. 30). Picking up these arrowheads triggers voice-overs from Thoreau about anything from nearby objects to wider observations about nature or life itself.



Fig. 30 – A view of Walden Pond at dusk during the summer. Given that gameplay takes place over an in-game year, a great deal of care appears to have been taken to make the scenery vivid in ways that are always true to the current season.

Should a player's inspiration fall, on the other hand, arrowheads will not be nearly as frequent and the world's colours will fade to near-gray tones. As a result, regardless of what resource players may be harvesting or what goal they may be pursuing, the game encourages one to examine their surroundings closely and constantly in a manner that echoes Thoreau's own transcendental²⁰⁷ worldview. Indeed, his philosophy swiftly sets the tone of the game through an opening quote: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life [...] and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."²⁰⁸ From the earliest moments of the game, then, players are made aware of their player-character's reasons for embarking on a year-

²⁰⁷ Transcendentalist thought emerged in the 1820s in the Eastern United States out of the Romanticism, Skepticism, and Idealism of numerous European artists and philosophers. Its essential tenets are that human nature is fundamentally good and that States and institutions have corrupted this virtuous essence by robbing the individual of their independence.

²⁰⁸ While the irony of experiencing the philosophy of 'living deliberately' in nature through the act of playing video game is certainly not lost on me, the game's slow mechanics and invitations to reflection nonetheless succeed in engendering a closeness to nature without one necessarily being close to nature.

long experiment in self-sufficiency and are encouraged to value the sights and sounds of the woods just as much as (if not more so than) its raw materials.

While many survival games may give players a hunger bar as a means to create meaningful decisions around resource management, here the lack of character death as well as Thoreau's striving for a more metaphorical sort of *living* (and therefore survival?) somewhat relieves that tension and the corresponding need for 'efficient' gameplay. This is reinforced by the fact that, even when compared to most other "walking simulators"²⁰⁹, Thoreau's movement speed is notably slow. There is a run button, but if one is too liberal with it then Thoreau will become exhausted and potentially pass out. Even so, the simple fact that one's character can never die means that resource gathering is never so distracting or so pressing that the player cannot stop and listen to the birds or simply stare up at the sky.²¹⁰ Just as *A Mortician's Tale* crafted an atmosphere for players to contemplate death, in these and other ways *Walden, a game* does the same for living. But the similarities do not end there.

If the player walks a short way from Thoreau's cabin, they will find the home of his friend and fellow philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, who historically owned the land on which Thoreau conducted his famous 'experiment'. Just beyond the Emerson estate lies the town of Concord where Thoreau's family home lies. Although transcendentalism emphasizes nature and the world, Thoreau had many critiques of labour and institutions in capitalist society, which can be gleaned from trips into Concord. Alongside Thoreau's home, the town also contains several small businesses, all of which incite further meditations from Thoreau while also tempting the player to indulge in various

²⁰⁹ A term (often employed derisively) to describe the genre of first-person game that largely consists of wandering through a three-dimensional space and experiencing a narrative.

²¹⁰ Once the player becomes accustomed to the routines of foraging and growing crops, they begin to engage in a number of other activities, all drawn from Thoreau's life, which range from assisting a scientist with surveying local wildlife and aiding the Underground Railroad in laying a safe path for fugitive slaves making their escapes northward, although the player is never punished for playing anachronistically (i.e. opting out of these moments of gameplay). While early objectives all tend to be within a short jaunt of Thoreau's cabin, by the end of the first in-game season, players begin to become comfortable with going further afield and coming to know the woods around Walden Pond.

conveniences (including the ability to purchase food and tools). Here, the player also learns that beyond being used to purchase supplies, Thoreau can earn money by publishing manuscripts and use those funds to pay off family debts or even his own taxes. Failure to follow through with paying taxes, in particular, can result in the player spending multiple nights in jail, which is true to Thoreau's life, however the decision is the player's.

This juxtaposition of biographical accuracy and player choice is the basis of many productive tensions in *Walden, a game*, which invite one to question or even critique Thoreau's ideas and lifestyle. For instance, there is an undeniable privilege to Thoreau's time on Walden Pond, from the fact that he lives just outside of town on land owned by a friend to the very idea that living outside of society is framed as an "experiment" (i.e. something that he could easily bring to an end). In the game, Thoreau is already a well-respected scholar and so can earn enough money to purchase a good portion of his supplies, thereby eliminating much of the work of foraging. And should the player ever get hungry, or should their clothes ever need repairing, they can walk to Thoreau's family home where his mother will routinely bake him pies or do his laundry. To my knowledge, making any of these less-than-transcendentalist choices does not elicit any internal conflict on Thoreau's part. Rather, a core conceit of the game is that players can undercut their own experience, playing within the possibility space created by Thoreau being a real person with real fallibility.²¹¹

Unlike *A Mortician's Tale*, in which a player consumes a predetermined narrative through rigidly constructed set pieces, *Walden, a game* presents one with a much messier, but no less detailed experience. While the narrative may gloss over any explicit mention of the tensions inherent in Thoreau's "experiment" on Walden Pond, Thoreau's class privilege and his potentially hypocritical trips home are all present in the game for players to tinker with themselves. Those who

²¹¹ If my reader is still not convinced of Thoreau's privilege, I direct them to this choice quote on labour: "I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain oneself on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we live simply and wisely." Arendt, at least, would disagree!

are only interested in exploring nature and reflecting upon Thoreau's ideas may never encounter these moments of gameplay, but those who do steal a pie off their mother's windowsill may then reflect on the extent to which this relates to the beauties and pleasures of the natural world.

Whereas Charlie's path to a happy ending with Magnolia Forest is left frictionless and utopic, when *Walden, a game* comes to an end, there is little fanfare or finality.²¹² Even so, the player has a clear sense of how they came to arrive at the end of their story.

In speaking of the design process for *Walden, a game*, Fullerton explains that the one core goal was "allowing players to explore their own sense" of where a balance between "the mean and the sublime" may be "and to reflect on how the choices we make with regard to that balance affect the quality of our lives" (Fullerton, 2019, p. 335). The 'mean and sublime' here refer to a division between the routine labour of foraging and keeping Thoreau's resource bars full and the transcendentalist experiences of life and nature that are characteristic of the philosopher's thoughts and writings. Like Khaled, Fullerton argues for the potency of player reflection for allowing each individual to locate that balance for themselves, a process that is enabled through what she calls "'player-centric design' of game *experiences*" (p. 334). While I would still argue that being a meticulous simulation of the life and work of Henry David Thoreau imbues the game with a fairly clear politic, then, Fullerton here seems to acknowledge and in fact celebrate one aspect of the problem of design: it does not matter whether or not a player "gets" the intended message of *Walden*.

While the proceduralist school presents a framework for making games that impart specific message and even Khaled's less overdetermined approach ultimately suggests specific design decisions which will "make" players behave a certain way, Fullerton here acknowledges that all play

²¹² Further emphasized by the fact that players can then choose to embark on another year in the woods, although this may be a result of the trope of an 'endless mode' (the ability to experience the core gameplay loop with no narrative limits) as a reward for completing games than a broader commentary on Fullerton et al's part.

involves some amount of reflection from the player (even as some design choices may inform *what* a player reflects upon). While she explains that “designing for slowness, or a pace of human thought” is a decision that encourages player reflection, she is quick to add that “this is not to say that there is not an internal process occurring in players of traditional game systems but, rather, that the design of these systems recognizes player ‘input’ only so much as that input influenced the operation of the system.” (p. 334). This an effective restatement of one of the limits of design. While one can make a game in such a way that it is poised to receive and interpret a particular subset of player interactions, there is more happening beyond these boundaries. And while Fullerton here suggests that certain choices allowed *Walden, a game*, to capture the reflection inherent to play within the operation of the system, the system can still only ever interpret so much.

While *Walden, a game* does give players a range of choices as they play within and perhaps against the ideas of transcendentalist thought, any subversive play that the game is capable of recognizing has already been accounted for by the code. Thoreau may not have a grand proclamation for why it is or is not hypocritical of him to take a pie off his mother’s windowsill, but Fullerton et al deliberately put that pie there in the hopes that players would encounter it and experience a moment of reflection. At the same time, however, any presence or lack in the game is liable to bring about thoughts over the course of play, many of which the system cannot account for because its code does not have any way to meaningfully recognize them. *While it may be subversive to the idea of who Thoreau was that we steal a pie off his mother’s windowsill, it is not subversive with respect to the game’s code or the designer’s intent.* And since any game brings about thoughts and reflections as a matter of course, I argue that road maps for “designing for” critical play, reflection, and so on are largely re-treading what always-already happens during the design process and during gameplay.

I see this as a return to what I said earlier in this chapter about the trouble with the idea of designing for subversion or an *intentional glitch*. The danger in claiming that there are ways to

design “for” criticality lies in the fact that this claim accords a power to the designer who adopts a particular method when in fact an individual’s critical faculties are engaged by any object that exists in the world (and many that do not!). This is precisely the argument made by Thoreau when he suggests that human beings need only look at the world around them for inspiration. My issue, therefore, is not with claiming that different games are capable of engendering different thoughts and feelings in players, but rather that the nature of design literature requires it to adopt a tone where the exact nature of these thoughts and feelings is said to be reliable and predetermined.

To be clear, the designs of all of the games presented in this chapter (and indeed in this dissertation) are critically engaging and ultimately evoke a wide range of emotions and ideas from those who encounter them. The games I have discussed in this chapter are in fact particularly effective at centering issues felt by many in the contemporary moment and codifying these sentiments into stories and mechanics that send particular signals to a would-be player. I am even willing to go as far as to say that the four games discussed in this chapter each succeeded at making me think about what I believe to be some of the things that they would like players to think about. But if we return now to the core ideas of this dissertation, then in short order we understand why design is not sufficient for imagining and enacting alternatives to the status quo.

4.6 Conclusions – On Finding New Weapons

4.6.1 – A Shout-Outro to Radically Slow Games

Before restating and refining the ideas touched upon in this chapter, I believe that it is important to acknowledge that there are many other games I could just as easily have included as part of the present analysis. While I am ultimately suggesting that the domain of design is not as effective an arena for combatting zugzwang as is the realm of play, I again wish to stress that game designers who make the effort to engage with these ideas are doing important work. While individual interpretations of any game may vary between people, the fact that many game makers center politics in their work or are so against having their games essentialized as wholesome makes

it clear that speaking truth to power is a key concern in their creative output, which aligns them with the aims of this dissertation and other counter-hegemonic efforts. And these designers are by no means alone in such efforts.

I might have looked to games like Kara Stone's *UnearthU* or TRU LUV's *#SelfCare* (2018) for examples of titles which parody and de-monetize contemporary slow and mindful wellness trends that place the responsibility of one's well-being on the individual instead of larger systemic issues. Ruberg and I discussed *#Self-Care* in particular, while unpacking what we called "the ambivalent cultural politics of care in video games" (2021, para. 1). While we argued that there was room to trouble the neoliberal push for self-management in all avenues of life, TRU LUV's app nonetheless came across as a good faith effort to produce a tool for care of the self that might translate into care for others in a manner that echoes my reading of *Kind Words* in this chapter. Stone's choice to critique wellness apps through a wellness app similarly produces useful commentary on the state of self-care while also suggesting that we move beyond tending to the self and look to tending for others and indeed the world around us.

Other titles, such as Die Gute Fabrik's *Mutazione* (2019) and Strange Loop Games' *Eco* (2018) similarly draw attention to our impact on the world while encouraging us to slow our consumption, both literal and emotional, of the planet we live on. While *Eco* presents itself as a *Minecraft*-like survival game where one gathers resources and develops technologies to ultimately stop the impact of a meteor, many systems are in place to track the player's environmental footprint. One must carefully balance saving the world with making sure that there is a world worth saving once they have succeeded, a task which, while very difficult to manage alone, is made much more feasible when players join a multiplayer server and cooperate. Coincidentally, *Mutazione* begins after a significant meteor impact, placing players in the role of a young woman visiting her ailing grandfather on an island whose denizens have all experienced unique mutations in the wake of a cataclysmic event from long ago. The player character learns that their grandfather is the

village shaman who teaches her special songs that carry the emotions of the island's inhabitants while also encouraging various local plants, and indeed the island community as a whole, to flourish.

I could go on – Thatgamecompany's *Journey* (2012) or *Flower* (2009), Thunder Lotus Games' *Spiritfarer* (2020), Infinite Fall's *Night in the Woods* (2017), Kojima Productions' *Death Stranding* (2019), Kara Stone's *Ritual of the Moon* (2019), Ian Bogost's *A Slow Year* (2010), Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018), Bill Viola Studio and the Game Innovation Lab's *The Night Journey* (2007) – these and many other games play with the idea of slowness to achieve a number of effects, whether relaxation, reverence, contemplation, or class consciousness. Each presents a compelling case for the critical potential of slowing down, evocative by Fullerton's claim that while “slowness itself is not equivalent to meaningfulness [...] the process of making meaning [...] does take time at a human pace” (p. 334). However, when it would come time to assess the overall effectiveness of each title for countering exhaustion, I would continue to arrive at the same set of conclusions. And while I have alluded to these ideas throughout this chapter, I now want to restate and elaborate upon them as we move from a discussion of design to one of play.

4.6.2 – *The End(s) of Design, The Endlessness of Critique*

Popcannibal's *Kind Words* stands as an effective example of how design is both in and of the world. The development team made a number of decisions which facilitated the creation and maintenance of a positive and caring player community. As a result, the game has been poised to make meaningful interventions in the lives of those who play it, whether by asking for help or offering advice. Even so, there are clear limits to what types of care and community building are possible on a niche and largely anonymous platform such as this. Care is made of much more than kind words. And while Popcannibal would likely acknowledge this, it seems that the purpose of their game was to help players make their day to day lives a little easier without offering any wider commentary on the many systemic issues that may lead one to seek out something like *Kind Words*

in the first place. The game props up neoliberal logics by offering a means of making do within the world but, like many wholesome games, offers no ways to push past such stasis-inducing comfort.

In *The Truly Terrific Travelling Troubleshooter*, Handsome Foxes in Vests similarly begins with the place of care in the contemporary moment, but directly challenges players to imagine a world in which the work of supporting one another is taken as seriously as more traditionally productive forms of labour. This fictionalized bureaucratization of care work simultaneously serves the purpose of guiding gameplay by informing the rules that direct a given play session. Even so, *5T*'s role playing element allows players a great deal of room for real-life experiences to bleed into gameplay, which arguably incentivizes some degree of critical reflection around the challenge to the dominant made explicit by the game's themes and paratextual elements. Still, the same openness that makes space for critical reflection allows players to wander off track and find takeaways which, while potentially salient in their own right, do not get at radical softness or the root causes of one's exhaustion as effectively as the designers may have intended.

In contrast, *A Mortician's Tale* situates players within a strictly predetermined narrative in which there is little room for meaningful choices. Instead, Laundry Bear Games opts to present a parable of life, death, and labour in the contemporary capitalist moment through the story of Charlie and the events which ultimately lead to her founding Magnolia Forest. Along the way, players are given the opportunity to reflect on their own mortality while also learning about progressive trends within the funerary industry that try to de-stigmatize death and dying. These newer attitudes and techniques are cast in sharp relief to the established corporatization of the dominant business of death. However, for all that the game critiques capitalism by having it be the source of all of the game's major and minor conflicts, Charlie's happy ending involves her somehow assembling the finances necessary to found her own business, the ultimate fate of which is unclear but which we are arguably made to assume is positive. While I do not believe that any game in which a character solves their problems through spending money is incapable of being

anticapitalist, the rigidity with which Laundry Bear tells Charlie's story makes the tensions posed by the game's ending both more obvious and less open to complicating through the act of play itself.

Finally, Tracy Fullerton and the USC Game Innovation Lab's *Walden, a game* is similarly tuned for reflection, but this is accomplished through a combination of mechanic and aesthetic choices which slow gameplay to a 'human pace' and give players ample opportunity to reflect on the life and work of Henry David Thoreau. At the same time, however, the game includes within it tools for undercutting aspects of its own argument by allowing players to disrupt Thoreau's "experiment" by nipping into town for some supplies or for a pair of socks mended by the philosopher's mother. Like any video game, there is a predetermined set of possible player actions which are allowed by the game code, but Fullerton et al intentionally expanded the play experience to understand and account for certain aspects of players deviating from what would seem to be the intended path. Although, by accounting for some forms of subversive play, the design team has done something similar to what Menkman calls "domesticating" the glitch and so this would-be playful critique of *Walden, a game* instead becomes part of the intended gameplay experience.

As we have already seen, video games inform and are informed by culture and the same can be said of any designed object. Each of the titles discussed in this chapter is imbued with the politics of its time, whether deliberately or not. In the case of *Kind Words* and *A Mortician's Tale*, there is a sense that they have emerged in response to concerns around mental health and corporatization respectively, although beneath the intentional nod to these issues, both games reify the status quo, one by instilling *comfort* (which we have seen to be a conservative force in Chapter 2) and the other by treating an escape from the more predatory aspects of capitalism through one's class privilege as a happy ending. Despite both games arguably being good faith efforts to address one or more causes of exhaustion, both nonetheless inherit and perpetuate logics that they would claim to denounce.

5T and *Walden* both take a different approach, beginning by acknowledging that the world we inhabit is organized in a particular way. Neither game makes the explicit claim that it transcends hegemony nor does either design team appear to have contented itself with speaking to only one part of a given problem. *5T* portrays an alternate reality in which care work is treated with the same level of decorum as other forms of labour as a way to both critique the shape of contemporary work and the devaluation of emotional labour. *Walden*, on the other hand, presents a largely unfiltered version of Thoreau's transcendentalist philosophy in a world replete with details to support this way of relating to the world. Even so, it contains within itself tools for players to explore the messiness of devoting one's life to any one set of ideas wholesale and in so doing enables certain counter readings. Even if I prefer this latter approach to the former, it must still be noted that these games are both subject to the same limitations of all designed objects.

Without wishing to wax philosophical for too long, I suggest here that a *design* is something that is imagined or built for a specific purpose. Given this, I argue that even if that purpose is a heightened critical consciousness or some form of sociopolitical emancipation, the designer encounters two problems. The first is that even in the most rigid of systems (as indeed games have a code to govern the player's actions) there is no guarantee that a user will 'get' the designer's intended message. For example, there is an undeniable aristocracy to many of the critical making practices which have emerged from universities and other institutions. Works may only be available for a limited time in specific museums or other institutional spaces and often operate at an elevated discursive level which limits the potential audience to other scholars and practitioners.²¹³ Even in the case of more widely circulated games which eschew the "serious games" moniker such as *5T* or *Walden, a game*, however, I have noted and one may imagine any number of ways that either could be played wholly independently of any notion of radical softness or transcendentalism, respectively.

²¹³ One can imagine the insularity of designers making critical designs for other critical designers to critique.

The second problem persists even if an object is designed to combat exhaustion and even if the user is able to receive this perfectly. Despite such ideal conditions, it is still an inescapable fact that the nature of a game design pipeline²¹⁴ is such that one or several individuals have encoded a particular message that they believe should be accepted and enacted by a multitude. Should scholars of games or digital media limit themselves to the question of how design can make meaningful interventions in the world, then we can never move past the power imbalance between designer and user, which severely limits the reach and longevity of this work.

To return to language used earlier in this chapter, the work of design can be a glitch in a larger hegemonic system - *5T* and *Walden* are two good examples of titles whose ideologies clash with neoliberal capitalism in specific ways. However, the player in these cases is still expected to be compliant, to receive and reflect upon a given message or lesson. I have called this deficit model that places the primacy of the object, its maker, and its intended use above the user's needs or practices *the problem of design*. In a sense, the theory of design is not the issue, but rather that at some point the theory *ends* and an object is made and put into the world to be taken up in prescribed ways. Recalling the ethos that underlies this dissertation, that critique and social justice are ongoing and never-ending processes: I argue here that design's finality is in large part what prevents it from being sufficient to address the exhausting status quo on its own.²¹⁵

Of course, I am not suggesting that any revolutionary cause should dispense with design or that designers are incapable of working in ways that stall or even dismantle the dominant. In fact, if we step away from the act of making for a moment, it is clear that there are many other ways that game designers have adopted social justice praxis. One notable set of examples can be found in

²¹⁴ Though it is more common in HCI than in games, there are schools of design which center the user or which are accomplished in collaboration with a given community, but even these have their issues.

²¹⁵ I once asked a scholar-practitioner of community-engaged design if his work accounted for the implications of the fact that, due to the constraints of research grants and university funding models, once a project is complete the resources that were used to support a given community must often be extracted as well. He said no.

some recent game bundles sold on itch.io – the Bundle for Racial Justice and Equality²¹⁶, the Indie Bundle for Palestinian Aid²¹⁷, or the Queer Games Bundle²¹⁸ – whose proceeds were donated directly to charities or split evenly amongst a community of marginalized creators. Each of these collective fundraising efforts was made possible by thousands of contributors pooling their works and demonstrating a willingness to redirect their profits to pressing global issues that are caused, maintained, and even exacerbated by dominant architectures of power. One might equally note the game development studios who have opted for co-operative, non-hierarchical labour models, including Soft Chaos, KO-OP Mode, The Glory Society, Pixel Pushers Union 512, and Motion Twin. By refusing the traditional top-down labour structure, members of a worker’s co-op have equal control over how their efforts are translated into a final, playable product.^{219 220}

While the purpose of this chapter has been to explore the limits and affordances of design itself with a view to arguing for there being a greater critical potential within play, this does not mean that the anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist efforts of game designers are unimportant or that no one should try to make games that are critical of the status quo. It is true that works of design theory have oversold what critical making is capable of enacting in the world.²²¹ But putting games out into the world that actively work against dominant logics and values still has the potential to undermine taken-for-granted norms, to act as a glitch in a social order that only works for those

²¹⁶ A fundraising campaign to support organizations fighting against racial injustice and police brutality against Black people. It featured games from 1391 creators and raised \$8.1 million USD.

<https://itch.io/b/520/bundle-for-racial-justice-and-equality>

²¹⁷ A fundraising campaign to support organizations offering relief to the people of Palestine while their region was bombed by Israel. It featured games from 1063 creators and raised \$900,000 USD.

<https://itch.io/b/902/indie-bundle-for-palestinian-aid>

²¹⁸ A bundle that served to raise awareness of and help support the work of queer artists and game makers. It featured games from 195 creators and raised \$112,000. <https://itch.io/b/861/queer-games-bundle-2021>

²¹⁹ For more information on worker’s co-ops, see Kidwell (2019) or Game Workers Unite (n.d.). For other examples of alternative labour and funding models, see *Weird Ghosts*, a Canadian impact fund for underrepresented game developers (Weird Ghosts, 2021).

²²⁰ I identify a similar emphasis on sustainability and longevity in expansive gameplay practices like modding and even patientgaming, although these communities are often less imminently interested in such questions.

²²¹ In a manner that, recalling the Introduction and Chapter 3, perpetuates the disciplinary gatekeeping described by Voorhees, Kocurek, Vossen, and Murray.

with specific privileges. Design may be an imprecise tool, but it is a tool nonetheless. I would much rather that more people whose politics run counter to the status quo continue to make art than that we leave all game making to large studios and others funded by the military entertainment apparatus, but I am not willing to stop there.

As Deleuze notes (and Keeling echoes), in the struggle against the society of control and the fight for social justice, “There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons” (1992, p. 178). In light of the constant movement that is expected of the multitude in its conflict with Empire, it is inevitable that design, which results in a “final” product is not adequate to this task on its own. It is for this reason that, in speaking of the critical potential of the video game, I argue we that must now look to play.

Chapter 5 - Playing At Radical Slowness: Trifling, (Re)Generation, and the Crash

5.1 - A Slow Stroll to the End (of Minecraft)

Mojang Studios' *Minecraft* is a game that has been in consistent development since at least May 2009 when an early version of it was first made publicly available. Since then, it has received hundreds of updates, has become the de facto best-selling game of all time²²², and even changed ownership when Microsoft purchased the studio and its projects in 2014. Given its lengthy development process, what the game is properly “about” has shifted over the years, but the basic gameplay remains largely the same: *Minecraft* is a sandbox-style game, whereby players essentially have free reign to do as they wish within the basic rules of the game world. Players find themselves in a three-dimensional world made entirely of blocks of various materials, each of which has specific characteristics, including the ability to be picked up (the titular *mining*) and artfully replaced (See Fig. 31) by the player or used in the construction of various tools and other items (the titular *crafting*).



Fig. 31 - An admittedly lavish example of a castle created in Minecraft.

A typical *Minecraft* world is procedurally generated, with new “chunks” being randomly built as the player explores outward in various directions. In so doing, the developers assured that

²²² Microsoft (2021).

there is no practical end to the vast landscapes and cave systems that the player can explore. However, across all stages of development and all unique worlds, there have existed many *impractical* ends to the gamespace.

While playing *Minecraft* on a computer, the F3 key opens a menu full of information including the player's coordinates in the world along the X, Y, and Z axes, with each block representing 1 unit of distance in any direction. From its initial discovery in a patch from March 2010 until it was later removed in September 2011, players who travelled 12,550,821 blocks away from their world's origin point would encounter one such end. The Far Lands was the name given to a bug with how new chunks are rendered at this distance from a world's center, which results in new terrain being generated in ways that do not resemble anything that occurs in (virtual) nature (See Fig. 32). While players could still progress a fair distance into the Far Lands before either falling into a bottomless void or lagging the game to a near-standstill, this porous monolith of stone and soil became emblematic of *Minecraft's* true limits.



Fig. 32 – An example of how the game world begins to fall apart at the beginning of the so-called Far Lands

Since one *Minecraft* block is estimated to be about 0.9144 metres (3 feet) in length, the distance from the origin of a world to the unravelling of the game's ability to function would involve travelling just shy of 11,500 km (7200 miles). When one combines this with the player character's

walking speed on flat ground and factors in that, in a standard *Minecraft* world, there is little totally flat terrain, it becomes difficult to estimate how long it would actually take to walk to the Far Lands. Given this, many of those who have actually seen the Far Lands first-hand managed it through the use of in-game cheats that allow flight and teleportation. This is not to say that no one has tried walking all the way to the end of their *Minecraft* world, nor is it even to say that no one has succeeded.

Gaming content creator KurtJMac is likely the best-known example of someone who has chronicled their attempts to push a *Minecraft* world to such limits. Although his Let's Play²²³ began on March 6, 2011 with a more standard exploration of the game in mind, he quickly “grew impatient” with the gameplay and by the series’ 11th episode began to head Westward with the goal of one day reaching the Far Lands (KurtJMac, 2021). Given that KurtJMac already had an audience, his journey (dubbed *Far Lands or Bust!*, or *FLoB*) garnered widespread attention and he was even able to use it as a means of soliciting donations for several charities. At the time of writing, his video series for *FLoB* has reached part 826. Since each video is about 45 minutes long, this suggests that he has been walking for at least 619 hours, or 26 days of real time.²²⁴ His most recent F3 press (in March 2021, ten years after his walk began) revealed that KurtJMac has walked a total of 4,856,980 blocks which, while quite far, is still only 38.7% of the way to his ultimate goal, one which he still fully intends to reach. As implied above, however, whenever KurtJMac does succeed at walking to the Far Lands, he will not have been the first to make it that far.

On June 19, 2020 YouTuber KilloCrazyMan arrived at the Far Lands after nine months of walking. Rather than playing in short bursts or in the context of larger charity events like Kurt, Killo logged into *Minecraft* each day and played lengthy sessions. That this feat could still be accomplished in so short a time would seem impossible to believe were it not for the fact that the

²²³ A classic genre of video where people give commentary over footage of their own gameplay.

²²⁴ An exact estimate of hours played is hard to come by, but this is the best metric that I found.

entire process was documented and observed. The footage of the final approach²²⁵ is extremely choppy – the framerate slows and objects in the world behave irregularly as the game uses 99% of its available memory to keep loading new pieces of the world. As the unmistakable mass of warped granite and dirt emerges out of the fog, Killo cheers in triumph. His chat explodes with celebratory messages. A notification appears on screen to show that the designer of *Minecraft* has donated \$10,000 for the effort. He has arrived at the end of a world that was said to be practically endless.

By playing in this way, Kurt and Killo can be said to be doing a number of things – pushing against the boundaries of the game, prioritizing their own goals over those of the game, extending the shelf-life of a piece of software, producing entertaining video content, and the list goes on.²²⁶ I would not necessarily dispute any of these, nor indeed many other readings of this gameplay from the ornately analytic to the dismissively mundane. What is most important for my purposes, however, is that these journeys to the Far Lands represent a form of slow, protracted play that puts these players in the position of a glitch within the designed system of rules that make up *Minecraft*. What I mean is that this way of playing represents a break in the expected relationship between player and game which reveals underlying details about both actor and system that would otherwise be hidden or taken for granted. It is the occupation (intentional or not) of this state, what it *does* to video games, and what it may yet do to the exhausting games of everyday life that is at the center of this chapter.

A player visits with their virtual neighbours while reflecting on how they are perceived and treated in their everyday life. Maybe we all have something to learn about ourselves from the experience of play if only we would take the time to do so. Another player picks flowers in a world

²²⁵ For a (presently unlisted) video of this, see KilloCrazyMan (2020). The appropriate timestamp is approximately 7 hours and 8 minutes in.

²²⁶ Were my focus not on slowness, this list makes me think I could equally speak of other communities like speedrunners or the demoscene.

marred by war. Maybe one day the carnage will have subsided,²²⁷ but the gardens will continue to grow. Others walk in a straight line until they reach the end of the world. Maybe one day if they keep walking, they will walk out of that game altogether. And perhaps, just perhaps, one or more of these parables will one day seep out of their virtual realms and into an apparently ‘realer’ world where they can offer us a (re)generative moment. Maybe they already have.

All that I have said of the status quo and its exhausting cycles of zugzwang has shown that we cannot afford to play along with goals that do not support our well-being. Instead, I would like to suggest that we can trifle with them while we seek a new path.

5.2 – The Beginning of the End

We have now arrived at the final leg of this dissertation, the culmination of so much of what has been alluded to in previous chapters. I began with zugzwang as the mechanism through which exhaustion persists and outlined my approach to solving it, including a consideration of how to define key concepts like “play” and “game” throughout the analysis. I then looked at the various ways that slowness is framed discursively, both within game culture and beyond, and uncovered the exhaustion caused by the transactional nature of play and reified in popular aesthetic categories like wholesomeness and coveted affects like comfort. In Chapter 3, I expounded at length on the nature of labour and leisure in the contemporary moment, both in everyday life and in the contexts of game design and indeed games themselves through flow and workification. Then, in the most recent chapter, I assessed the degree to which game design is an effective method for undoing our exhaustion, which involved scrutinizing specific games as well as the language and theories of design literature itself. While a number of game makers are doing important work to question and combat hegemonic norms, the top-down relationship between designer and player is not one that I believe can bring about lasting change by itself.

²²⁷ In fact, since I initially wrote this line, (which refers to *World of Warcraft*, for those encountering this footnote before the rest of the chapter) it was announced that the war between Alliance and Horde would no longer continue (Law, 2022).

The purpose of this final chapter is therefore twofold. Its first function is of course to present new arguments in support of my claim that the play of video games can do (or indeed has already done and may yet do) tangible, (re)generative “work” in combatting neoliberal, capitalist framings of labour, productivity, and leisure, and the exhaustion that these enable. While the concept of radical slowness has featured throughout this dissertation, it is here that I will describe it in earnest. Secondly, this chapter is also the latter half of the discussion of play, games, and critique that began in Chapter 4. While I have effectively accounted for the strengths and weaknesses of game design as a weapon in the fight against zugzwang, I still have to evaluate the extent to which play passes muster. I have been clear throughout this document that I see a critical, (re)generative potential within play, but I now want to elaborate on that assertion by returning to the mechanics of play as a critical act and by presenting several radically slow case studies which I see as moving towards *rest* as opposed to *comfort*.

To begin, I will return to the literature of queer failure, queer time, and the glitch. While each of these concepts has already featured in my analysis to some extent, I have yet to read them in concert with one another. Doing so will lay the groundwork for a fuller understanding of my sense of radical slowness through a *deliberate* sort of failure as well as Goetz’ (2017) call to lean into the notion that games are a waste of time. This latter point in particular will serve as the jumping-off point from which my understanding of radical slowness can be made plain. Indeed, while the question of *how* to waste time through play is an important one, in many ways I see it as secondary to the question of *whose* time is being wasted. The framework of queer failure is invaluable here for the way that it holds that one should (or, in the case of many marginalized people, *cannot help but*) fail specifically with regards to the exhausting logics of *the dominant*, what we have been calling the status quo.

This notion of deliberately failing to uphold hegemonic ideals will then be tied back to the theory of games and play through Suits and specifically his figure of the trifler, one who respects the

rules of a game but not its goals. Particular attention will be paid to a less-cited portion of Suits' framework, namely his discussion of the *institution* and the *claims* of a game. I will suggest that the trifler's refusal of a game's claims with a simultaneous awareness of its institution positions them as one whose play can change the game in the sort of ways that I am after in the struggle against zugzwang. While the same characteristics are ascribed to Suits' cheater, I argue that the trifler's refusal of *goals* rather than *rules* makes them the best candidate for critiquing the game in ways that will actually lead to meaningful change (and not simply the patching of specific glitches). With this theory laid out, I will then move on to my case studies.

I will begin with a discussion of Gracie Lu Straznickas' (2020) autoethnographic analysis of her time with *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*. While bedridden with an initially undiagnosed chronic condition, Straznickas turned to the game as both a way to experience activities and interactions that were not accessible to her at the time and as a way to reflect more broadly on her experience of learning to manage chronic pain. I argue that although she is doubtless a player within the *Animal Crossing* world, the critical, (re)generative thought process that emerged from her interactions with the game world position her as a trifler in the context of everyday life, specifically with relation to normative models of wellness and disability. This case study also prompts me to make the first of several claims about the nature of radical slowness, namely that *it is not a single tactic that one either succeeds or fails at upholding*. Rather, this case study and this dissertation are about finding shades of radical slowness where we can and incorporating them into our own ways of being.

For our second case study, we will look to *World of Warcraft* and the player character Doubleagent the Pandaren Shaman. In a land marred by endless conflict, some players have attempted to play against the grain by embracing pacifism. Doubleagent is one such case, but the fact that he does so as a Pandaren, who all begin as neutral parties in the war, means that despite having reached the in-game level cap, he has never been prompted to pick a side. This has had a number of other consequences for the shaman, including his being locked out of entire segments of

gameplay. As such, I argue that Doubleagent embodies both the more generative sense of boredom and the figure of the glitch in *World of Warcraft*, a creative interruption to the status quo that reveals a number of the game's core assumptions.

Still, the fact that he is respecting the level cap as a measure of success leads me to suggest that he is trifling with many of the game's logics without openly critiquing than the larger values that it props up. Even so, this does not mean we should dismiss his play. Rather, to our first claim, the case of Doubleagent prompts me to add a second, namely that *no play practice is inherently emancipatory or hegemonic* and that we must always attend to what a given set of actions are *doing* within a game if we want to understand their critical potential.

Finally, I will return to the vignette that opened this chapter and offer an analysis of KurtJMac and KilloCrazyMan's lengthy hikes to the Far Lands. While I begin by demonstrating how the overall attitudes and approaches of these players differ, I ultimately defer to our two earlier claims and ask what this sort of play is *doing* to the *Minecraft* world and what *glimpses* or *possibilities* it reveals. For instance, walking towards the Far Lands causes the game's performance to gradually drop as it struggles to load new assets. That, coupled with the fact that even though the Far Lands were eventually patched out of *Minecraft*, there are still hard limits to its supposedly infinite gamespace, prompts me to argue that Kurt and Killo's play is a trifling within the game-as-software that also offers insights into how we might trifle in everyday life.

Relevant here as it was in the case of Doubleagent is that this style of play is undoubtedly *boring* in a way that I liken to the more critical, (re)generative sense of the term. Since walking far enough away from a world's origin point can crash *Minecraft* altogether, I argue that their play practice, when taken to its furthest, most boring extent, is an effective model and metaphor for how we might persist against and ultimately move beyond the larger games that shape the exhausting status quo. I call this *the critical potential of the crash* and argue that the sheer magnitude of such a

walk in *Minecraft* serves as a reminder of a fourth claim was originally established in our Introduction – *the work of radical slowness is never-ending*.

None of these case studies serves as a textbook case of a radically slow praxis. Rather, each offers glimpses of what others have done and what we may yet do to play within and against those games which would see us vying for individual gains instead of flourishing as a collective. To put stock in this particular ‘as-if’ may seem optimistic, even naïve, but it is only by dramatically trifling with the goals of hegemony that I argue that we can change the nature of the system itself. I will then conclude by gesturing to the difficulty but necessity of imagining that there are other games that we might yet play.

5.3 – A Willful Glitch: Queer Failure, Queer Time, and the Trifler

5.3.1 – Breaking (With) Normative Time

In the previous chapter, we briefly noted the work of Safiya Noble, specifically her discussion of how the glitch is deployed as an excuse for algorithmic or other technologically driven biases and inequalities that affect minoritized individuals. I appreciate her re-casting the glitch in this light for the way it complicates what would otherwise seem to be a singularly radical concept, as well as for the ways this analogy expands the scope of glitch. Indeed, if so many technologies are designed in ways that fail to account for even the most basic needs of users outside the default of white, able-bodied, and generally male, then it is not a stretch to assume that many of the larger institutions which we all navigate suffer from the same programming oversights.²²⁸ Rather than accepting that prejudicial institutions and technologies are *glitches* in an otherwise equitable machine, I join Noble and others²²⁹ in arguing that any design in which some thrive while many more are ostracized and othered are in fact *the present system working exactly as intended*.

²²⁸ And that both these and most other things are designed exclusively by and for the politically “de-politicized” default demographic that is cis, straight, bourgeois, able-bodied, white men.

²²⁹ Benjamin (2019) and Fickle (2019), for example.

Non-whiteness, queerness, disability, non cis-maleness, poverty, and other sites of marginalization are rather glitches in the sense meant by Menkman. They are ways of being that *interrupt* the taken-for-grantedness of hegemonic norms ('the way things are' – the status quo) while *revealing* more about both how these norms came to be and how they harm those who do not stay in-line with the dominant. Of course, embodying the glitch in this way is not an inherently radical experience so much as it is a constant struggle against oppression in all its phases.

When pressed about the *willfulness* of queer failure for this reason,²³⁰ Halberstam has said, "Even though I'm talking about the embrace of failure, I'm not suggesting that it's always under our control. In fact, I'm countering the idea that it's *not* in our control by asking that it *be* in our control" (Ruberg, 2017, p. 207). This *desire* for and corresponding *insistence* upon control that is expressed by the willfulness of queer failure is vital to my own work here. Indeed, I see radical slowness as both a recognition and a refusal of the neoliberal, capitalist logics which drive our dominant sense of labour and leisure.

I am reminded of Pow's description of Jamie Faye Fenton's *Digital TV Dinner* as the queer, transgender programmer's "willing a computational system to produce something [...] beyond the closed circuits and rules and regulations of the program" and "a record of Fenton knowing a system so well, and so completely, that she could imagine how the system might be otherwise, and how it might be unmade" (2021, p. 202). It is in this spirit that I connect glitchy, queer failure to video game play through Goetz, who, we may recall, argues that video game play represents a "pure wastefulness of energy and time spent outside the narrow strictures of hetero-reproductivity"

²³⁰ One might similarly critique *radical slowness* for my suggesting we willfully take on the risk of moving slower than expected, although I will show below when speaking of Suits' *player* that I see my concept as less reliant on any particular marginalized category and more a general orientation towards a socioeconomic system under which all (or nearly all) of us experience hardship. It will also be shown that such precarity is combatted here through the cultivation of solidarity and the mounting of a collective resistance, something that is similarly not unique to radical slowness as a concept.

(2017, p. 240).²³¹ Games, in their apparent frivolity, become a site of queer failure, one that, critically for my purposes, can be framed in part as temporal. Playing games, in this sense, re-orientates the player from a (re)productive, hegemonic subject to someone who is *unproductively* out of joint with normative time.

This notion that games are a waste of time is something I would like to linger with a moment. While I have devoted much of this dissertation to discussing the various ways that games are productive *of* and *for* the exhaustion and unfettered financial growth idealized by neoliberal, late capitalism, this is by no means the only (nor arguably the most popular) way that play is framed culturally. Recall how I have framed Agamben's work – leisure time is *tolerated* because it makes us ready to do more work. It is something that the system must put up with, and so it has been put to work. We have seen how moments of non-work are *productive*, whether *ideologically* through the reification of play as a transaction, *biopolitically* by restoring the energy necessary to do more work, or indeed *literally* by having leisurely pursuits cost money (and this list is non-exhaustive). Even in instances when leisure is apparently 'free' as many suggest of play, Agamben's core premise explains why such freedom is ultimately tethered to the logics of labour and productivity in the end.

In the planning stages of this work, I often tried to think of ways 'out' of this trap described by Agamben. Was all leisure necessarily a form of labour? Must it always be productive of something? Finding myself unable to dispense with this claim, I took another approach. If leisure *must* be productive of something, then the problem becomes locating ways to work *on* and *at* play that undermine or actively dismantle the infrastructures of power which leisure otherwise sustains.

²³¹ I am similarly drawn to of Knutson's (2018) writing on queer time and the play of *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) here, specifically his note that "To recognize nonnormative temporal acts such as resetting, rewinding, pausing, and backtracking as not only mechanics within a commercial medium but also deviations from wider norms is to open up that medium to reencounter what makes play creative, free and playful" (para. 25).

This is how queer theory and particularly Goetz' work became central to the concept of radical slowness. He channels Halberstam's willfulness when arguing that we should lean into the notion that games are a waste of time. I then take it a step further by suggesting that we be deliberate about *whose* time is being wasted. This is why I say that radical slowness means the difference between taking one's time and having one's time taken. It is a critical commitment to stymying hegemonic progress, a tarrying with the dominant in a manner that recalls Suits' figure of the *trifler*.

5.3.2 – *A Tactic Not to Be Trifled With*

An arguably less-immanent piece of Suits' well-known taxonomy of players, cheaters, triflers, and spoilsports is that "while players acknowledge the claims of both the game and its institution, triflers and cheats acknowledge only institutional claims, and spoilsports acknowledge neither" (2014, p. 51). Given this chapter's focus on the critical potential of play, I now wish to tinker with this distinction between the *claims* and the *institution* of the game and examine what it means to attend to both, only one, and neither.

When Suits writes that it is only the player, the can-do respecter of rules and goals, who acknowledges the claims of the game, his meaning seems clear enough. A player is here to play – they may do so for a variety of reasons and they may blur the line between what I have elsewhere called a game's *implicit* and *explicit* rules,²³² but they know what they are supposed to achieve and are aware of one or more ways to do so.²³³ Whether we are speaking of the games as objects or systems, the player is a flowing subject moving through predetermined rules and towards predetermined goals.

²³² That is, the rules as they would be expected to apply based on the game's narrative and conventions of design versus the rules as they actually apply based on the game's code (glitches and all). See Scully-Blaker (2014).

²³³ I note here that I begin here by deliberately not complicating the question what players bring into a game out of respect for Suits' commitment to the Magic Circle. That play is political will be returned to in due course.

Once one ceases to respect one of either the game's rules or its goals, however, something happens. The claims of the game fall away and all that remains is the institution of the game itself – its existence as a set of rules that can be followed (or not) in pursuit of a specific goal (or not). If one is a trifler, then they are aware of the rules and the goals of the game and are willing to play within the game's constraints, but they do not value the game's goals or what they 'claim' one should value. The cheater, in contrast, is attuned to a game's goals and desires to attain them but is willing to ignore the 'claim' that the current set of rules is the best/only/correct way to attain success. Both of these archetypes therefore acknowledge the game's *institution*, which may be as simple as acknowledging that the game *exists*, but each has their reasons to reject the larger claims of the game.

Finally, there are those who care neither for the rules of the game nor its goals. The spoilsports. Given Suits' claim that these individuals recognize neither the *claims* nor even the *institution* of a given game, we might then say that for spoilsports the game either does not matter or does not exist. It may be out of maliciousness or perhaps mere happenstance that they find themselves ignoring the rules and goals of a given gamespace and their actions can range from innocuous to destructive, but whatever the case the spoilsport is someone who is playing at something else entirely.

Throughout *The Grasshopper*, much of Suits' analysis is based in examples of the sorts of games one might play for fun or for sport, but by the end of the work he pivots to discussing larger games and the sort of utopia that might exist were we to treat everything through the logic of play and game.²³⁴ Indeed, for Suits "game playing is what makes Utopia intelligible" since it is only by peeling away the instrumentality of everyday acts and turning them into playful activities that such happiness would be attainable (2014, p. 188). While this is clearly a fantastical proposition, there is

²³⁴ An interesting inversion of Wark who argues we already frame everything this way but I would hardly call that utopic.

an undeniable allegiance between it and my own goal of dismantling zugzwang. To fully capture why the trifler is at the center of my framework for radically slow play, then, I now want to do what Suits only implies we might do and apply his framework to the games of everyday life. We will begin with the spoilsport and work backwards because, as will become clear, total ignorance of the game is far less useful than total adherence.

In the context of the games which we must all play for survival, I find it difficult to conceive of how one might become a true spoilsport. I am reminded of our discussion of the patriarchal exit fantasy. As Sharma suggests, to imagine oneself as somehow external to the neoliberal, capitalist gamespace is a privileged and ultimately flawed position.²³⁵ While one's privilege can insulate them against the harsher realities of the status quo through the pursuit of comfort, not even a billionaire with their own rocket ship²³⁶ can wholly transcend the relations which make up the status quo. The tactics of the spoilsport cannot apply to the game-as-system because it is a game that cannot be refused.²³⁷ These tactics cannot therefore be our pathway to change.

By respecting the institutions but not claims, the cheater critiques the system but often has little to no desire to change it since they benefit from the glitches and exploits that they have uncovered. As with the spoilsport (and indeed all of these categories) there is no inherent politic to the cheater's tactics. The billionaire paying nothing in taxes or the cliché of stealing a loaf of bread to feed one's starving family are both, strictly speaking, cheating the system in similar ways. As these examples make obvious, however, our earlier discussions of classed experiences of time and

²³⁵ Equally salient here is Arendt's insistence that maintenance through labour is a toilsome fact of life.

²³⁶ At the time of writing, we are 'lucky' enough to have three of these and it is about as upsetting as you might expect. See Jackson (2021).

²³⁷ If we were to get slightly more granular and look to specific institutional games, then we could imagine spaces of spoilsport contestation for a variety of ends both radical and conservative (Ahmed's feminist killjoy in chauvinistic spaces, the misogynistic mens' rights activist in feminist spaces), but the largest games are not assailable in this way. Though I should hope by now this is clear, I by no means wish to suggest that these two types of spoilsports are both 'fighting a good fight' by resisting particular games, or that I in any way wish to debase the former spoilsports by comparing them to the latter. Feminist spaces are not generally aligned with hegemonic norms, so to be a spoilsport in such a space is actually to uphold patriarchal, even chauvinistic norms. Of course, there are also feminist spaces (white feminism, TERFS, etc.) that are uphold some dominant norms while combatting others, so context is ultimately key.

the dual meaning of making do (raking it in vs. scraping by) are relevant concerns when comparing cheaters' tactics. Some understand the institution of the game and can reap the benefits, while others recognize enough to know that they will never win.

What unites all such practices, however, is that by making no effort to change the metrics by which success is measured (whether out of a desire to keep raking it in or an inability to do anything but keep scraping by), cheating will not change the game from the bottom-up.²³⁸ Rather, it strikes me that the cheater is far more likely to bring about top-down changes which seek to close loopholes which threaten the status quo – an increase in policing, not a decrease in the disparity between players.²³⁹ Here we might also think of the ways that privilege impacts the sanctions levied against cheaters in everyday life (i.e. those who break The Law): that crimes which are made right through the payment of fines serve only to punish the working class and American prisons are bloated with BIPOC who have received disproportionately long sentences for minor drug-related infractions are two good examples among many.²⁴⁰

Further, if being poor, Black, or queer is equivalent to 'not playing by the rules' of hegemony (and recalling the work of Noble or Halberstam, this is certainly the case), then being a cheater, here, abjectifies those who are out of line with the dominant rather than providing any tangible victory over the status quo.²⁴¹ There is a big difference between how 'operating against the system' is framed when we speak of someone struggling with addiction as opposed to a group of (generally white, young, and male) Redditors thwarting Wall Street and making money hand over fist by

²³⁸ I suppose that an individual might be able exploit a loophole to make an example of themselves and also get the loophole patched, but this is clearly a niche case that requires our assuming that everyone in the present system is a good actor.

²³⁹ Trickle-down economics is not a catch-up mechanic after all!

²⁴⁰ See the NAACP's Criminal Justice Fact Sheet for one breakdown of this systemic bias (2022). We might equally recall an earlier footnote about loitering as discussed by both Walter and Ruha Benjamin, and who is permitted to linger in public spaces.

²⁴¹ Even in spaces where the language of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion is put to practice, there is still a sense among many (white, cis men, mostly) that affirmative action and other like practices are a travesty of justice. For more on how this is framed see Ngai on what she calls the gimmick (2020).

pouring money into GameStop stocks.²⁴² While the clear refutation of a game's claims might make such play 'critical', the cheater's critique is either punished and patched or else kept secret at all costs – it is thus a tactic that tends to benefit the individual and the present more often than the collective and the future.²⁴³

The trifler is, by my reckoning, the most promising player for working against hegemony. Like their claim-agnostic sibling, the cheater, the trifler critiques the system but instead does so by refusing to value what the system suggests ought to be valued. As Mitchell notes, they recognize both “the totalizing extent of gamespace and the failure of gamespace to totalize” (2018, p. 146). While certain goals of larger games cannot be entirely ignored if one wishes to maintain their life, the trifler might take a maliciously compliant path through the system to arrive at what is expected of them, or they might divert resources from hegemonic goals to other goals all their own. Unlike the spoilsport or the cheat, the trifler does not reify the status quo through their actions (beyond those aforementioned moves which are necessary for survival and which are not unique to the trifler). If one of the goals of a hegemonic game is ultimately to perpetuate itself and the trifler refutes the legitimacy of goals, then the trifler (uniquely attuned to this knowledge, the *institution* of hegemony, in a way that the spoilsport is not) can play in ways that do not reify apparatuses of oppression.²⁴⁴

²⁴² I mention the GameStop case here in passing, but so much more could be said. Essentially, a large number of Redditors began investing money in GameStop's stock (partly as a joke) and this led to the stock doing well and to a number of larger hedge funds losing a lot of money. Kilmentov (2021) offers one summary. Despite this being, in most respects, the system working as intended, these young investors are often framed as mavericks and upstarts who gamed the system and won. Meanwhile someone who steals baby formula from a pharmacy is prosecuted.

²⁴³ Recalling the example of stealing food to feed a starving family, the critical potential of cheating is not always a waste, but I maintain that it is more a vehicle for sustenance (of the self and the system) than change.

²⁴⁴ For the sake of completeness, I attempted to think of examples of hegemonic trifling. While it is beyond the purview of my immediate argument, I would say that some possible examples of trifling that supports hegemony include performative wokeness and contemporary liberal (radical centrist) ideals. In both cases, we can observe the language of the oppressed being taken up by privileged actors for their own gain. Of similarly tangential note is that there are also solitary, self-interested forms of trifling which do not magically build into a collective project.

Beyond the slowness already implicit in the term trifling, I believe that deceleration is a prime triflers' tactic by its own merit. Slowing one's play delays the promise that one will fulfill their role as a player while not leaving one immediately vulnerable to punishment as no rules have been broken.²⁴⁵ It is a form of regeneration which, by imagining new goals, is also generative of new modes of being. This is a style of play which acknowledges the institution²⁴⁶ but not the claim of the game in a way that has the potential to change a system's core values. And while it is certainly possible to trifle in individualistic ways or in ways that elicit a top-down intervention, this does not preclude the possibility that a collective trifling, the likes of which I am arguing for in radical slowness, could bring about change from below.

Finally, the player. As one might imagine, the player plays along. This is who the trifler and the cheater pretend to be in pursuit of their disparate goals and who the spoilsport may deliberately try to upset by upending the game altogether. One can draw parallels here with the cultural dupe described by Adorno and Horkheimer or the blank-slate, "ideal" player imagined by proceduralist design theory, however I believe that to leave it at this is an oversimplification. Beyond what I have already said in Chapter 4 about all play involving reflection, or the various theories of decoding, poaching, and re-authoring texts that were discussed in the Introduction, to frame the player in this unilaterally ineffectual way ignores that Suits' utopia is specifically made up of players.

Although the agonistic nature of critique and the work of social justice are such that we can never arrive at a world where we can (or should) play thoughtlessly, what cheat, trifler, or even

²⁴⁵ Here I think that Juul's sense of a game being not-yet complete is recast in a critical light. There are, of course, environments where tarrying for any amount of time is immediately obvious and swiftly punished (our go-to example of the Amazon warehouse worker certainly fits the bill), but that is more a result of speed being a specific goal than trifling being a poor mode of attack.

²⁴⁶ Again, the trifler acknowledges the institution of the game because they must do so to live. However, I do note that I see in this word "acknowledge" a secondary implication that the trifler is also someone who sees the system for what it is. One can easily follow the system's rules without directly acknowledging them, though I personally do not say this in a way that I want to come across as an unflinching endorsement of Horkheimer and Adorno.

spoilsport would not enjoy playing a game that lets everyone (themselves included) flow and flourish? While the work of changing the game can never be truly over, there is a big difference between playing when one is stuck in zugzwang and playing within a system that seeks to address exhaustion and other obstacles to equity. Further, it cannot be overemphasized that, under the current system, *everyone needs to embody the player to some degree in order to survive*. Just because you have a day job to keep a roof over your head does not mean that you are incapable of also working to dismantle the exploitative institution of work as it functions today.

To play along out of necessity is *not a failure*.²⁴⁷ So long as players do not unquestioningly accept the claims of the game, then change remains possible. This is something we should keep in mind as we pivot to discussing our case studies for radically slow play.

5.4 – Managing Pain (and a Municipality) in *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*

Although I have mentioned other games in the series prior to now, *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo, 2012) merits a brief introduction. In the game, players take on the role of a person moving to a new town populated entirely by anthropomorphic animals. Though this basic premise is true for all players, the game allows one to customize their name, the name of the town, and elements of their physical appearance before gameplay properly begins. Upon arriving in town, the player character is shocked to find that they are being hailed as the town’s new mayor, a misunderstanding that they are unable to clear up. In short order, they are taught the extent of their mayoral duties by their aide, Isabelle, and are able to secure a parcel of land, a tent to live in, and a modest debt for said properties from the local business-racoon, Tom Nook.

²⁴⁷ This is important. Too often, I think that people on the left check each other’s behavior in ways that are not always conducive to engendering collectivity and personal growth. The purpose of calling someone out/in is to teach them how to do better, not to lend credence to the idea that the windmills that are ‘cancel culture’ are in fact dragons. Obviously, there are many instances where someone goes too far or is clearly a bad actor and no marginalized person is obliged to tolerate, educate, or forgive someone for their actions or their words. And equally true is that in a number of cases, it is the person being called out who responds poorly, doubles down, and causes controversy. All I am ultimately saying here is that one must exist in the present system even as they seek to critique it.

From that moment onward the player is encouraged to explore their town by introducing themselves to their new neighbours and perusing the local shops. And while there are overarching goals in the game such as paying off one's mortgages to Tom Nook, the player is largely free to shape their character, their home, and indeed the town itself to their heart's content. As noted in Chapter 2, games in the *Animal Crossing* series are quintessential cozy games for many due to their cute, colourful aesthetic and their overall lack of conflict (See Fig. 33).



Fig. 33 - A typical screenshot from *New Leaf* featuring the game's bright colour palette and the mayor's aide, Isabelle.

Though it may be a fraught capitalist playground,²⁴⁸ *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*, like any other game, can come to represent many things for many people. For Gracie Lu Straznickas, the game became a useful tool for managing chronic pain. In an autoethnographic analysis of her play, she explains that, after being bedridden due to a then-undiagnosed condition, “Playing [*New Leaf*] fulfilled a desperate wish for the everyday experiences that the pain had quickly stripped away. Walking through my town, relief washed over me as I engaged with a familiar virtual world that had continued to exist without me.” (2020, p. 72). I see her account of playing *New Leaf* while learning to manage her chronic pain as one example of slower play that exists apart from a hegemonic sense of what games and leisure are *for*.

²⁴⁸ See Aveiro-Ojeda, S. (2018) and Byrd, M. (2017), for examples of contrasting takes. Vossen (2020) also offers an effective summary of this, what she calls ‘Nook discourse’.

In speaking of the alternative pleasures afforded by *New Leaf* that made a marked impact on her during this (re)formative period, Straznickas uses the term “slice of life game” to encapsulate the slowness and the mundanity of the *Animal Crossing* world (p. 72). Straznickas argues that *Animal Crossing* and other slice of life (might we say cozy) games including *Stardew Valley*, are popular because each “allows an experience [the player] cannot otherwise have,” that they fulfill a “fantasy for ordinariness” felt by many (p. 76).²⁴⁹ And as she writes, “[*New Leaf*] similarly offered [her] a world where [she] could move without consequence of pain. This specific style of play in regard to [her] disability gave me the fantasy of free movement” (p. 76-77). Distinct, I believe, from other discussions of games as fantasies of power and mastery, the author here suggests that the game appealed to her as a simulation of the everyday and of the taken-for-granted movement that she could not readily access in her everyday life.

Mindful of the presumed normalcy of certain types of bodily movements, Straznickas describes *New Leaf*'s emphasis on the quotidian as a source of “paradoxical enjoyment” (p. 78). While she affirms that “societal norms and expectations can cause direct and indirect harm” to those with chronic pain or disabilities, she writes that “the ability to not only complete a mundane activity, but to be encouraged to do so and to enjoy it, was important in [her] pain management process and reflection” (p. 78). The unfaltering rhythm of the game, as enabled by NPC interaction and the use of real-time to simulate the passage of days are both cited as spaces in which she could feel “distracted and engaged” in a way that complicates extant critiques of games and escapism (p. 84). The gameplay was an effective proxy of some of the experiences that she was lacking (beyond movement, she also discusses maintaining interpersonal relationships in this light), but *New Leaf* was itself an experience which she was free to attend to as much or as little as she wanted while in the process of coming to understand herself and her condition.

²⁴⁹ She specifically ties this to the Millennial generation, of which I will remind you 56% think humanity is doomed (Galer, 2021).

Given Straznickas' account of this time, we may generally say that, so far as the game itself is concerned, she was a player playing along. If one examines the passages quoted above or her larger analysis, they will find that her gameplay always consists of engaging with *New Leaf* on its own terms. At the same time, we may equally see that there are aspects of her play which are decidedly *not* within the purview of the game. While none of the villagers in her town, indeed nothing in the game's code, could be aware of this, Straznickas was playing the game during a specific time in her life in which it therefore fulfilled a specific purpose. Although I doubt that anyone who contributed to the design of *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* would be upset at the idea of Straznickas playing the game as a way of attaining "a deeper balance between [her] internal self and [her] external body," I am similarly skeptical that enabling this experience was an explicit design goal (p. 84). Within the game-as-software, Straznickas played by the rules, but the waters become murkier if we step back to consider the game-as-leisure object, or indeed the games that make assumptions about what a productive body *should* be doing.

Towards the end of her analysis, Straznickas cites Keogh (2018) who describes video game play as "a complex interplay of actual and virtual worlds as perceived through a dually embodied player" (p. 55). This notion that players find embodiment in a game world while also being literal bodies in the world is particularly apt for her experiences with *New Leaf*, which she argues offered her "the opportunity to re-imagine [her] goals as more achievable and to never be shamed at their simplicity." (Straznickas, 2020, p. 84). In this sense, I see the author's time spent playing *Animal Crossing* as a trifling with games of everyday life.

Straznickas can be said to re-tool the play of *New Leaf* to her own *personally productive* ends. Her *Animal Crossing* play is not critical of the game – it embraces both the institution and the claims of the world. Instead, the game serves as a platform for (re)generative play – a critical reflection on the self and received notions about disability which is simultaneously restful in

nature.²⁵⁰ In a certain sense, this would be a perfect example of Flanagan's critical play model were it not for the fact that these reflections are entirely *player-driven*. *Animal Crossing* is not a "serious" game. It is not "about" managing chronic pain or dismantling harmful models of disability. Despite, or perhaps partially *because* of this, though, Straznickas was able to apply the game to her own situation and take from it what was useful to her, all while wasting time in a virtual world. We might call this play a form of self-care, but one which is motivated by the player's own desires rather than the neoliberal imperative to strive for normalcy. But does all of this necessarily mean that her play is a case of radical slowness?

While I have suggested that Straznickas' time with *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* represents a trifling with dominant logics of disability and productivity, it is more difficult to suggest that her play was a *deliberate slowing* of how she engaged with the game-as-software or any larger game of productivity. I do not wish to repeat Halberstam's initial misstep here by suggesting that her circumstances, or even how she made do within them, were a series of willful, political decisions. And from how her autoethnographic account of playing *New Leaf* is written (in the past tense, most notably), it is clear that this way of interacting with the game was a temporary arrangement, part of a learning process that has now concluded in some respect. Nor do I not wish to mirror the overstepping exhibited by the Wholesome Games movement by enforcing the moniker of *radical slowness* to what was a personal account of her own experiences. Critically, I do not even think that this case study would require such overt intentionality to warrant examination in this dissertation. Here we arrive at what I think is a key point for understanding the project of radical slowness.

Recall what I said above about Suits' player not being a failure or a dupe, but rather someone that we must all be at various points in time out of necessity. Here I am reminded of

²⁵⁰ While I do not discuss it more deeply here, I was particularly struck by Straznickas' account of how real-life friends treated her differently following her diagnosis (either coddling her because of it or going out of their way to speak around) while the animal villagers of course remained consistent in their treatment of her player character.

Ahmed's line on feminist complaint - "mere persistence can be an act of disobedience" (2014, para. 37). As we well know and Ahmed is careful to point out, however, persistence is exhausting, all the more so when you are persisting against an institution that is both inhospitable to you and impervious to the same fatigue that wears away at your bodily faculties over time.

For all that I speak of it in relation to rest, leisure, and even idleness, to *persist* in radical slowness is similarly taxing. Anyone who is adept at procrastination knows how exhausting doing nothing can be! Part of why I am so emphatic that radical slowness is a tool in the collective fight against exhaustion is for this exact reason - no one person can afford to be radically slow indefinitely, we need to take shifts. One of the chief aims of this dissertation is to produce some of the language necessary to make such a collective, (re)generative project possible.

To be clear, then, *radical slowness is not an observable ideal in the world, whether grounded in video game play or the games of everyday life*. It is something to be *strived for*, not *discovered*. While I will devote a piece of the Conclusion to discussing some real-world movements that espouse similar values and frustrations, like Halbersam I am countering the lack of what I would like to see in the world by asking that it exist (Keeling might say "acting as-if it does/will yet exist").²⁵¹

This chapter and indeed this dissertation are not about discovering a hitherto unknown technique for solving the world's problems - there is no silver bullet here. Instead, this project is about speaking of what we *can* see and what we might do with it. It is an exercise in writing-down exhaustion (as the set of circumstance that makes radical slowness necessary) and in trying to catch glimpses of a radically slow praxis through the foliage like the glint of a panther's eyes amidst a mosaic of leaves and branches. It is my hope that such glimpses might allow us to piece together how the panther moves so that we may begin to move in the same way.

²⁵¹ Our earlier conversations on as patientgamers or anti-zugzwang game design are cast in a new light here. These, too, arguably offer *glimpses* of potential even as they bear critiquing.

That said, then, I do not believe that it is fair or even useful to frame radical slowness as an either/or proposition – as something one succeeds or fails at accomplishing. Rather, I am suggesting that we trifle when we can and play when we must. In Straznickas’ case, even if the ultimate result of her play experience is that she became better at managing her condition in order to ultimately resume many facets of her life that had been put on hold,²⁵² the fact remains that her path to self-management was *(re)generative* – it eschewed institutional models of wellness and allowed her to come to know herself and her pain in an impactful way. As noted above, I believe that Straznickas’ is an example of one trifling with logics outside of the game, but not within the game itself. For our next case study, I now wish to discuss a situation in which the opposite is true.

5.5 – Bringing Peace to a World of War(craft)

Had this dissertation been written approximately a decade ago, I might say that *World of Warcraft (WoW)* needs no introduction. However, given the steady drop in *WoW*’s playerbase, I am inclined to think that some amount of preamble is required. Upon its release in 2004, then-just-Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft* was not the first massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), but it quickly became the most popular and most influential of the genre. Set in the same universe as the rest of the *Warcraft* series, players were able to choose sides in a massive conflict between two factions – the Alliance and the Horde. Within each side there were a number of races to choose from as well as many classes, so that one could truly feel that their character was their own and an active participant in the world of Azeroth and its ongoing war. With the game’s unprecedented popularity came multiple expansions, including 2012’s *Mists of Pandaria* (Blizzard Entertainment), which acts as the catalyst for this case study.

With the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion came the first opportunity for players to make characters that did not immediately have to choose a side. By opting to play as a Pandaren, a new race introduced in this expansion, players would begin the game on The Wandering Isle, a smaller

²⁵² Which, we should emphasize, is a *good* thing even if it does not dismantle capitalism!

land mass between the two major continents occupied by each of the Alliance and Horde. Through the completion of quests and the accumulation of experience, Pandaren players are eventually able to reach a point where they can choose a faction and set out into the larger world of Warcraft, but for the early stages of the game, they are neutral entities in a land apart from the larger conflict. It was from these humble beginnings that the player character, Doubleagent, the Pandaren Shaman first spawned in *WoW* and while he has since gained enough experience points to reach the maximum character level, it is here that he remains, having never slain a single creature.

Over the years, a number of *WoW* players have experimented with pacifism as a viable way of enjoying the game. Chang (2017) discusses the play of at least one character who “relied on wandering the game world and developing character skills in healing, herbalism, and mining” to gain experience points and level up (p. 19-20). What makes Doubleagent more interesting than other cases for my purposes, though, is that the unique combination of being a pacifist *and* a Pandaren which, as I will argue, allows his play to move beyond a tacit critique of the virtual world at war and positions Doubleagent as a glitch within the larger system of the game (and, by extension the system of norms and assumptions that it perpetuates).

To reach the level cap without attacking anyone or anything, Doubleagent relied on the game’s “herbalism” system which “grants a small amount of experience every time a (sic) herb is gathered” to reach the level cap all while still remaining in the first area of the game (Bogos para. 5). He never accepted any quests or completed any dungeons and, as a result, Doubleagent was never prompted to choose between Alliance or Horde nor was he able to leave the Pandaren homeland. As such, the character was locked out of many basic gameplay features including “dungeons” or “PvP” (player vs player combat) since the tutorials for these gameplay elements are locked behind violent quests (para. 3). Unlike other *WoW* pacifists, then the specific context in which Doubleagent chose to play peacefully rendered him partially invisible to the game’s underlying logics due to

assumptions made on the part of developers as to how the game would/should be played (See Fig. 34).



Fig. 34 - A 2016 screenshot of Doubleagent when he reached Level 110, his lack of armor or any other significant cosmetics starkly contrasts with other characters at this level

Unlike Straznickas, Doubleagent can be seen to embody the figure of the glitch within *WoW* itself. His refusal to buy into the logic that progress is made through slaying beasts and advancing questlines represents an interruption in several of the game's key processes. And the fact that his refusal to engage with those violent actions ripples outwards and causes interruptions to related mechanics and activities like dungeons and PvP reveals just how much of *WoW*'s gameplay grows out of the basic premise that players must kill to become stronger. This case study is notable to me for the ways that a player's actions are unaccounted for by *WoW*'s code. While the game may not wholly break, Doubleagent is certainly blocked off from a set of play experiences in a manner that was clearly unintended by developers. That said, just as Straznickas' autoethnographic account of her play cast it in a vastly different light from how it may have seemed otherwise, it is worth addressing Doubleagent's motivations for playing in this way.²⁵³

²⁵³ One tension which I note here and elsewhere (Scully-Blaker, 2020) that emerges when attempting to "read" play practices like this one is that the only reason I was able to learn of Doubleagent was because his playstyle had been shared online. More precisely, I would say that his play had attained a level of infamy that made it stand out among the doubtless millions of pages of *WoW*-related forums and discussions. What are we to do, then, with the fact that most folk accounts of subversive player practices are only discoverable by virtue of the fact that someone posted about it online? To consider this a "tension" may seem strict, but I would be remiss to not at least note that the very act of sharing ones actions online is an end in itself for

As one might imagine, Doubleagent's play has garnered its fair share of attention. Within the *WoW* community, a number of players are aware of Doubleagent's quest for peaceful mastery. He has a YouTube channel on which he shares his gameplay and it is not uncommon to see comments on his videos which commend him for playing in a unique, even subversive way. After other players posted enough about his exploits in community forums, Doubleagent's popularity apparently led to his writing an FAQ. From this, we can learn that he made it to level 90 after an imposing "173.5 days" of playing the Doubleagent character and that he was first attracted to playing in this way "when [he] heard about Pandaren being neutral until level 10" (Starym, 2016). This unique design choice was what drew him in initially, but Doubleagent adds that once a friend "suggested that I would never be able to do it," this goaded him into persevering (Starym, 2016). While Doubleagent was initially motivated by both a desire to tinker with the limits of the game, then, he was ultimately pushed to follow through in order to prove a friend wrong.

While such apolitical beginnings may seem to undercut my effort to find glimpses of radical slowness in Doubleagent's play (recall my earlier critiques of wholesome games), I do not see it that way. Consider, in the first place, the likelihood that someone would purchase *World of Warcraft* with the explicit purpose of playing as a pacifist. As we have already noted, this is not intended, nor is it particularly exhilarating gameplay, particularly relative to the sprawling dungeons and battlefields that Doubleagent's play precludes. In that sense, I see Doubleagent as an example of the sort of boredom which Haladyn and Gardiner argue leads to a "desire to see more than is given" (2017, p. 11). Like Pow's discussion of *Digital TV Dinner*, I argue that Doubleagent is an example of someone knowing a system well enough to understand the ways that it might be trifled with and broken.²⁵⁴

many, even as I will soon suggest that this does not impede our ability to gain useful insights from Doubleagent's play.

²⁵⁴ While I can certainly understand someone reading Doubleagent's play as a display of prowess and mastery that aligns with the values of hegemonic masculinity and its corresponding fantasy of control (even as his minute-to-minute gameplay is admittedly simple and repetitive, one still gets the sense of his "pulling

Here we might equally ask whether this play style is trifling since, reaching the level cap is arguably one of *WoW*'s goals. To this I would say that Doubleagent's hyper-fixation on the level cap operates in direct opposition to many of the game's other goals to the extent that many become functionally unattainable. Although it is doubtless true that Doubleagent (the player) is someone who has access to a non-trivial amount of free time to spend playing *WoW* in ways that many others do not, this does not change the nature of how his play *functions* (or does not function!) within the land of Azeroth.²⁵⁵

Recalling the point that we raised in discussing Straznickas and *New Leaf*, the fact that Doubleagent's pacifist playthrough of *World of Warcraft* is not a seamlessly critical example of trifling as it could have been does not prevent us, nor should it discourage us from learning from this case study. While the larger context of a given play practice certainly matters, *there are still glimpses of something important here*, even if we Doubleagent does not write an FAQ where 'articulating a radically slow praxis' is his stated reason for embracing the (re)generative boredom inherent in collecting herbs for 173.5 days. Recall what I said above in response to Straznickas' play – there are no easy solutions to be found here. Even earlier, as I critiqued a number of games and design practices in Chapter 4, I still argued that such work should continue because, at present, *they are some of the only tools we have*.²⁵⁶

one over" on the developers), as we will discuss below, I believe that dismissing Doubleagent's play solely on these grounds is a grievous error.

²⁵⁵ See Ruberg (2020) on the ambivalence inherent in reading queerness into subversive play practices.

²⁵⁶ This is a total digression, and a shamelessly self-indulgent one at that, but I am reminded here of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*. It tells the story of the eponymous lead heroine, Emma Bovary, who grew up reading books and poetry and whose understanding of how the world works is entirely couched in those discourses, which makes her easily exploitable by more skilled and cynical practitioners of these discourses (the town pharmacist who reads the newspaper every day, the travelling merchant who knows all the trends coming out of Paris, etc.). One of the most infamous of these manipulators is the libertine, Rodolphe Boulanger, who knows the language of love as well as Emma does, but is cynical enough to recognize that there are other discourses at work in the real world. To give you an idea of who he is, there is a great scene when he calls of his tryst with Emma by writing her a letter full of the flowery language she would expect from a leading man in one of her novels. To emphasize that this process is so artificial for Rodolphe and any emotions he expresses are falsehoods, Flaubert has him dab his finger in water to produce droplets resembling tears. In any case, at one point Emma speaks to him of her love for him and of course it resembles the platitudes of the novels she read because that is the only language she knows. Tragically and comically,

And so, while Doubleagent has given me no reason to imagine that he is a chauvinistic gamerbro living out a fantasy of control for Internet clout, neither has he given me the sense that his pacifism emerges out of a set of political or ethical ideals that are commensurate with any radically slow praxis. What Doubleagent *has* given me, however, is this story of his play – this tactic which is ours to interpret and rework towards our own ends. Perhaps my reading of Doubleagent’s play is a result of my search for glimpses of radical slowness, or perhaps it is because the fact that Activision Blizzard made an NPC version of the character (See Fig. 35) to honour his achievement makes me feel like such interpolation suggests that there had to be an initial transgression, a contradiction worth resolving with a wink and a nudge and a few lines of code.²⁵⁷

Rodolphe assumes that she knows the game as well as he does and so he says the right things in the moment but imagines that her words are as much a formality of his, in response to which Flaubert writes: “you must, he thought, beware of turgid speeches masking commonplace passions; as though the soul’s abundance does not sometimes spill over in the most decrepit metaphors, since no one can ever give the exact measure of their needs, their ideas, their afflictions, and since human speech is like a cracked cauldron on which we knock out tunes for dancing-bears, when we wish to conjure pity from the stars” (Flaubert, 1992, p. p. 154). In my forgotten past as a literary scholar, I read the “as though” as a rare instance of Flaubert directly inserting himself into the text to assert that what follows it is true – language *is* an utterly broken tool for expressing the boundless totality of human thoughts and feelings. In comparison to such depth, the sounds we make and the words we write are akin to a shabby sideshow even as we reach beyond the limits of our understanding. This is one way that I think through the striving towards something better (here through radical slowness). Recalling the Crozier and Friedberg quote on critique from Chapter 1 – maybe hitting your head against a wall and hoping it breaks is not the most advisable way forward, broadly speaking, but there are times, more than one would think, when such broken tools are the only ones we have. And this is one of them. Nothing in Deleuze’s call for us to seek out new weapons guarantees that we will ever happen upon a perfect solution (and who can afford to wait around and find out if we will?), nor does Keeling’s suggestion that we live ‘as-if’ the revolution will come mean that we can kick back and think positive thoughts until things are different. We have to do the work and we have to do it now, so my suggestion is this: grab a shovel, or whatever else you have on hand. Keep digging when you can and rest when you cannot.

²⁵⁷ Not unlike Noble’s hegemonic glitches, even if this context is decidedly less dire than those she describes.



Fig. 35 - The “Venerable Shaman” an NPC that permanently cements Doubleagent into WoW’s lore and history. It, too travels the world leveling up through mining and herbalism.

Whatever the reason for Doubleagent’s play, the most important takeaway from this parable for me is that *no play practice is inherently critical or radically slow, nor is any play practice inherently a reification of hegemony*. Throughout my analysis I have repeatedly pointed to both the centrality of, and the ambivalence caused, by context – Sharma’s dual nature of slowness, the (a)politics of wholesome games, etc. – and the same holds true here. Doubleagent’s pacifist *WoW* play is not a marquee case of radical slowness, but the act of playing this specific game peacefully, and what that *does* to *World of Warcraft*, what it reveals about the game’s assumptions, nonetheless offers us further glimpses of both the politics of *WoW* and what radically slow play might look like.

In contrast to Straznickas’ *New Leaf* play, I am inclined to argue that Doubleagent is trifling with *WoW* itself, even if he is not necessarily trifling with the logics of everyday life which the game props up. As noted above, his play ignores and actively prohibits access to most of the game’s goals, but his embrace of a more privileged source of boredom and his apparent surplus of free time prevents me from suggesting that he is making do in the same sense that we might say Straznickas was.²⁵⁸ While Doubleagent is by no means as privileged as Sharma’s business class traveler whose

²⁵⁸ And even this is based on the limited information I had – an autoethnography vs a FAQ. Either way, here one would do well recall what I said earlier: to be a player is not a failure. While it may be useful in a number of contexts to critique Doubleagent’s play, here I maintain we should instead focus on lifting out the

time is deemed so important that is outsourced onto the time of others, he certainly does not seem to be barely scraping by here either. Despite this, there is undeniably something *at work* in his play which can be lifted from this case study and tuned to our larger ends, and not just in the ways that he subverts *WoW*'s design.

De Certeau uses the term “*la perruque*” (French for ‘the wig’) to any technique which involves “the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer” (1980, p. 25). This can come in many forms, from writing a personal note while on the clock to using a workplace’s resources for a personal project. Of the worker who practices *la perruque* De Certeau writes that one “diverts time (not goods [...]) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit” (p. 25). While it is not the object of this chapter to suggest that Doubleagent is engaging in such a tactic,²⁵⁹ I bring up *la perruque* to remind us that appearing to be productive of one thing does not preclude a given practice from being productive of other, potentially opposing things as well. Recall my earlier note on the trifler and time – since their critique is of the *ends* of a game rather than its *means*, they are well-positioned to seem as though they are playing along for a long while. In many instances of trifling, such discretion may be an asset.

Again, I do not read Doubleagent’s play in this way to defend him from valid criticism, but rather to suggest that there are things to be learned from his play regardless of how we read the politics of his play. To complement our first observation that there is no perfect example of radically slow play, we have now seen that *no individual practice is hegemonic or emancipatory in a vacuum* and that, in fact, the tactic of *la perruque* may be a trifler’s best friend. True to form, however, our third and final case study is one in which the very act of sharing tactics on a massive

epistemologically useful pieces and, if context leaves us truly skeptical of the player himself, re-appropriate them for our own ends.

²⁵⁹ Although, for the sake of argument, can we really say that his pacifist play is something other than his *own work* disguised as normal *World of Warcraft* play?

scale is one of its greatest strengths. While we have already been acquainted with the Far Lands, some more details may be warranted.

5.5 – Walking Out of *Minecraft*

I think it is fair to say that *Minecraft* is one of the best-known pieces of software of all time. Still, out of a desire not to date this work I have already discussed the game, its world, and the elusive Far Lands in the introduction to this chapter. I also described two separate quests to walk all the way to the Far Lands: KurtJMac’s popular, but in-progress “Far Lands or Bust” and KilloCrazyMan’s 9-month ‘rush’ (relatively speaking) to reach the end of the world. With everything that has been said about the glitch, the trifier, and radically slow play so far, I now wish to return to these players and, in true *Minecraft* fashion, delve more deeply into their play to see what lessons it may yield for the larger research questions posed by this dissertation.

Here, as in the case of Doubleagent, both Kurt and Killo livestreamed their play and uploaded recordings of these broadcasts to YouTube. As such, we can glean that these journeys to the furthest reaches of *Minecraft* each began, at least in part, out of a desire to entertain, to produce content for others to watch. An interview with KurtJMac confirms that he began his long walk out of a desire to approach the game (which, in 2011 was exceedingly popular among Let’s Players) from a fresh angle to distinguish himself from other channels (Parkin, 2014). I was unable to find anything so concrete about KilloCrazyMan, although he has not appeared to upload a video since his ultimate arrival at the Far Lands in June 2020.²⁶⁰ While the two began with the same goal, it is nonetheless clear that their approaches and mindsets do have notable differences.

From that same interview with KurtJMac, we can learn that his play quickly accrued enough of a following that he could quit his job and live off of YouTube ad revenue. In fact, within several months of beginning his journey, he partnered with the charity Child’s Play and eventually began

²⁶⁰ Based on KilloCrazyMan (2020a), he appears to be taking a “long break” which certainly casts his play in a more laborious light.

raising money for several other charities as well. “Far Lands or Bust” is self-described as a slow voyage to the end of *Minecraft* that is “about the journey and not the destination” (para. 15). This claim is supported by the fact that Kurt only uploads episodes in approximately hour-long chunks, not to mention that he has only travelled a third of the way to his destination over the last decade. In some sense, actually reaching The Far Lands has become secondary to other things, such as engaging with his following and raising money for causes he supports.

While KilloCrazyMan has received less publicity for his efforts, this does not mean that his reasons for playing are a total enigma. As he approached, and ultimately achieved, KurtJMac’s original goal of walking to the Far Lands, a number of online discussions²⁶¹ inevitably emerged which compared both players. From these, it becomes apparent from accounts of those who watched him that he played much more frequently and for much longer bursts than Kurt, at some points walking for as long as 12 hours at a time. As was the case with Doubleagent, the amount of time that Killo was able to devote to playing *Minecraft* each day for nine months is quite striking, but the comparison does not end there. From these discussion posts, I also had a distinct sense that Killo, like Kurt at the start of his journey, was motivated by the desire to tinker, or what at least one Reddit user speaking of Killo summarized with the phrase “because why not?”

From this, we may suggest that Kurt’s framing his play is the more pensive, perhaps even deliberate, of the two in a way that recalls Straznickas’ reflections on her time with *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*. In contrast, Killo’s marathon play sessions and the fact that he has already succeeded in reaching the Far Lands aligns his play more to the curiosity and desire to do what has not been done exhibited by Doubleagent. As we discussed in relation to the latter’s pacifist play in a world of war(craft), however, though the insights that we have into the motivations of these players are

²⁶¹ See Redacted 2 (2020) and the_fall_equinox (2019). In the case of the former thread, it is still accessible, but the user deleted their Reddit account.

significant, they do not ultimately override my interest in the specific act of walking to the Far Lands.²⁶²

As noted in the introduction of this chapter, I see Kurt and Killo's efforts to travel to the furthest reaches of a *Minecraft* world as a form of trifling with the game, as well as a case of players embodying the figure of the glitch. By refusing to engage with a number of the game's core mechanics (with only cursory amounts of mining and crafting on display) and instead walking in a near-endless straight line, both players are testament to the fact that there are alternative ways of being within the game space. Add to this the fact that their particular play style gradually makes the game struggle to render items and blocks properly, culminating in the algorithmic explosion of the Far Lands themselves, and this emergent play practice becomes more than a novelty. While aspects of their approaches differ, Kurt and Killo's play places a slow, but inescapable pressure on *Minecraft's* code such that they risk undoing the very fabric of the game itself.

In our first case study, I suggested that Straznickas' engagement with *New Leaf* was that of a player even as she trifled with larger social values and expectations while working towards an understanding of herself and her pain. In contrast, I suggested that our second case – that of Doubleagent's *WoW* pacifism – represented an example of someone whose trifling in the game world had glitchy implications even as his play could potentially be read as pursuing normative ends. What kind of scholar would I be if my third case study did not attempt to neatly close this dialectic! To conclude, I now wish to suggest that Kurt and Killo's treks to the Far Lands represent a case of trifling within the game and beyond in ways that surpass the critical potential of glitch and gesture to the critical potential of the *crash*.

²⁶² Something that both is/is not notable here - both Kurt and Killo's play was productive for them as individuals in ways that were not the case for either of our earlier case studies. Kurt was able to quit his job and even raise money for charity on top of the ad revenue that supported his playful work/workful play, and from Killo's VODs, it is clear that he did receive donations from viewers and even started a Patreon (since deleted) to support his efforts. While both were playing, they were also ultimately *at work* in a way that does not apply to either Straznickas or Doubleagent.

Within the gamespace of *Minecraft*, the act of walking in a straight line does not violate any of the game's rules, although it clearly eschews a number of the game's goals. While *Minecraft* and many other so-called 'sandbox' games are celebrated for the range of gameplay options afforded to players, there are still clear sets of goals that players are anticipated to pursue – building a house and building a massive mosaic out of coloured wool are tapping in to the same set of mechanics.²⁶³ And while exploring randomly-generated landscapes is also a goal unto itself, the Far Lands, and the degree to which the game struggles to render them, are an indication that Kurt and Killo are taking this goal to a further extent than was expected.

To wit, in the same article that features interview snippets from KurtJMac, we also hear from *Minecraft*'s original designer who explains, “when implementing the ‘infinite’ worlds, I knew the game would start to bug out at long distances [...] But I did the math on how likely it was people would ever reach it, and I decided it was far away enough that the bugs didn't matter” (2014, para. 5).²⁶⁴ Given the choice between patching an extremely out-of-the-way glitch and assuming that few to no players would bother to find it without cheating, ironing out the Far Lands was not deemed worthwhile. Here, the creator of *Minecraft* did not anticipate that Kurt would ‘grow impatient’²⁶⁵ with the game and that this boredom would provide the energy necessary to persist in achieving something so out of reach, and yet so disruptive.

Here I think again of Noble's hegemonic glitch, specifically its masking the willful maintenance of a known issue. There are many glitches in video games that are allowed to persist simply because they are not likely to be discovered over the course of regular gameplay – given how often marginalized voices go unheeded, there are doubtless many such cases in everyday life. It

²⁶³ In fact, *Minecraft* became more explicit about this as time went on with the addition of an Achievements system as well as a narrative ‘end’ to the game complete with a credit roll.

²⁶⁴ While it is not an exact parallel, this attitude is reminiscent of what I said earlier in this chapter about how the act of trifling is not transgressive in a way that generally warrant's top-down intervention.

²⁶⁵ It is not lost on me how perfect it is that Kurt describes the inspiration for his play as his becoming an impatient gamer. Although it has to be a coincidence, I cannot help feeling that this means I am on the right track here.

is only through a shared commitment to refusing the claims of a game and trifling in these unanticipated ways that such willful oversights can be interrupted and revealed to a wider audience. In both video games and the games of everyday life, it is only when these things are brought into the public eye that the pressure to change the game can emerge.

Of course, depending on the game (the object or the logic) and the nature of the glitch, some things will be patched well before others, and not always for the reasons that we would want or expect. To the best of my knowledge, however, the only reason that the Far Lands do not exist in current versions of *Minecraft* is that in the 1.8 beta update, the entire algorithm that dictates terrain generation was overhauled to better distinguish between different biomes in the world. That this significant change resulted in the elimination of the Far Lands seems to have been a coincidence, a suspicion that is strengthened if we consider that the official patch notes make no mention of their removal (MCUpdate, 2011). While the Far Lands no longer exist, a new set of limits have taken their place which, while considerably further away, present an effective metaphor for what I see as the fullest critical potential of Kurt and Killo's trifling. Why walk to the edge of the game when you can walk out of it altogether?

My reader will recall, when they existed, the Far Lands would spawn 12,550,821 blocks away from the origin point of a *Minecraft* world. This equates to about 11,500 km, or the distance between Southern California and Syria. In the current Java version of *Minecraft*, if a player were to walk 33,554,432 blocks (about 30,682 km, or 75% of the Earth's total circumference) they would discover that the algorithm that handles all in-game lighting would suddenly break. It seems that the sun itself refuses to shine on all but a few buggy pockets of the world this far out. As such, monsters can spawn at any time of day and mushrooms which normally only grow in dimly lit caves can thrive on a surface world where the sun dares not shine.²⁶⁶ Should the player forge onward in this world of darkness and walk to an x or z coordinate of $\pm 2,147,483,647$ (approximately 2 million

²⁶⁶ Which, I concede, is quite on-brand for mushrooms.

km, or the distance between Earth and what the International Telecommunication Union considers Deep Space), something both more and less dramatic happens. The game itself cannot sustain a greater distance and instead ceases to function.²⁶⁷ The algorithm is overwhelmed and the game has no recourse but to shut itself down. Were this the game of chess from Chapter 1, we might say that White *resigns*, bringing the game (and with it, Black's state of being in zugzwang) to an end.

Though practically impossible, the fact remains that if someone were to persist in walking in a straight line for a long enough period of time, if they could muster the requisite *boredom*, they could still succeed in walking *out* of the game itself. Within the immediate context of *Minecraft*, this is of course not all that groundbreaking – there are many ways to crash a video game that are simpler than walking further than anyone has, or ever will, walk and, if exit is what one seeks, they need only quit the game through the menus. However, by gradually overwhelming the game's code in this way, our hypothetical walker reveals that the apparently infinite expanse of the gamespace in fact has a very clear limit. This act, which I see as the fullest elaboration of Kurt and Killo's play practices, also has wider implications if we consider the games of everyday life.

Recall Sharma's claims about the nature of exit as a patriarchal fantasy which can only ever amount to a temporary escape or a state of willfully ignoring the oppression of others. In an Arendtian sense: Jeff Bezos can be richer than some countries, but even he cannot fully escape the basic obligations of the maintenance of the self. Given the immense ease with which wealth allows such needs to be met, however, this seems a small price to pay. Indeed, the problem of zugzwang is only a problem for the working class and only because, under our current system, those who stand to gain the most from any meaningful change are also the worst-positioned to see that change through. Given my claim (via Wark) that the logic of games persists across virtual space and everyday life, however, what are we to make of the forced exit of the crash?

²⁶⁷ All info from Minecraft Wiki (n.d.).

Lingering on exits here: we have Sharma on the one hand who argues for the need for care and collectivity as opposed to what she sees as an individualistic and chauvinistic gesture that is not an exit at all, but rather a self-absolving of one's responsibilities. On the other lies Ahmed who suggests that exit can be useful or even necessary in given contexts, particularly when one finds themselves in an institution that unfalteringly operates counter to their wellbeing, although it does not seem likely that the two would disagree about the chauvinism or indeed the falseness of what Sharma calls the masculine exit. Through the metaphor of the crash, I argue that exit *is* ultimately possible. While it is true that in the largest games of all, the actor cannot remove themselves from the system, here we open up the possibility of instead *removing the system itself*.

While the status quo has many provisions in place to maintain itself, these arguably cease to matter if the system that these things protect is dismantled. It is clearly the case that making do or even acting as a glitch within a system is more attainable than causing that system to crash. Even so, this latter form of interruption which, worse than interrupting the game, brings the proceedings to an unceremonious end, is theoretically attainable, and I believe that there is a critical benefit to proceeding *as-if* that is the case. While Kurt and Killo have served as embodiments of the *glitch* in their journeys to the Far Lands, the play practice itself, the act of walking in a straight line embodies the *crash*, which has the potential to overwhelm the game and cease its operations altogether.

I see this play and the consequences of taking it to its fullest extent as a clear case for the critical, emancipatory potential of radically slow play. By trifling with *Minecraft* (wasting its time as one also wastes their own) to the nth degree, the player is able to both literally and metaphorically walk out of the game itself, stretching the glitch to the point that it becomes the crash. I do not wish to imply that all efforts towards meaningful change through radical slowness demand this same, effectively impossible, amount of effort. Although, given what we have said about the endlessly necessary and necessarily endless nature of critique, this case study and its theoretical limits do serve as a fruitful reminder that *the work of combatting zugzwang is never truly over*.

While something as dramatic as the crash remains a tantalizing prospect if we wish to see the present system undone, we must recall our established commitment to a criticality which is ongoing and self-reflexive. Recalling Sharma's critique of exit, or the many critical theory works which contend that resistance to power "is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power," it can be exceedingly difficult to imagine there being an 'outside' to the largest games which we all play out of necessity (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). Indeed, part of that necessity goes beyond mere survival and instead relates to the fact that for ones such as us who have lived this way since birth, *we simply have no frame of reference for how things could be otherwise.*²⁶⁸

Whatever the shape the revolution takes and wherever it brings us, a collective and introspective criticality will continue to be necessary to ensure that we do not fall into old power relations or indeed that new, potentially worse relations emerge. While the work may never truly end, the possibility *of the possibility* that we can bring the present game to a sudden and unceremonious end is cause enough, I think, to keep pushing.²⁶⁹ Like the *Minecraft* character in the diegetic space of the game world, though, we are wandering into uncharted territory. For our purposes, that such exploration is possible comes as a result of the last five chapters of analysis – a careful mapping of what I have called the hegemonic status quo, as well as the mechanisms through which it is maintained:

The neoliberal, capitalist logics that underpin our globalized world are failing. But worse still is that the decline is occurring in such a way and at such a pace that to wake up each day is to be reacquainted with the sense that there is nothing to be done. While our existence on (and over) the precipice of social, political, economic, and ecological collapse is undoubtedly of concern, the *problem* as have framed it here, the true *travesty* that the preceding analysis spits from between its

²⁶⁸ But, as Keeling suggests, "the limits of knowledge" are not "a problem to be overcome, but [...] the condition of possibility" (p. 2019, p. 14).

²⁶⁹ I am indebted to my advisor here for the quip that, though there may be no outside to power, there *is* an outside to Foucault.

teeth, is rather that *ours is a system which depends on these issues seeming unassailable*. But perhaps if we slow our relations to such impulses, if we trifle with the very notion that our only goal should be the make to best of things, then we may yet find ways of being in the world that do not rely on unfettered growth of all things, including exploitation and human suffering. We have nothing to lose but our tattered comfort with a dying world. We have nothing to gain but the chance to undo that which prevailing wisdom suggests cannot be undone.

It is my hope (my as if) that this chapter has brought us a better understanding of where, when and how our energy can best be spent in service of such a revolutionary project. Before drawing the present investigation to a sudden and at least somewhat more ceremonious end, let us revisit the major takeaways from this chapter.

5.6 – The Radically Slow Playbook

The purpose of this chapter has been twofold. On the one hand, it served to present case studies which document the critical potential of play as distinct from the design-centric “critical play” model. Straznickas’ autoethnographic reflections on *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* reveal that she repurposed the game to meet her needs and, in so doing, came to a renewed sense of self-understanding while refuting harmful social framings of disability. Doubleagent’s pacifist play positioned him as a glitchy actor within *WoW*’s system, whereby he was locked out of entire sections of gameplay due to his refusal to play in ways that the designers expected and endorsed. Finally, KurtJMac and KilloCrazyMan’s journeys to *Minecraft*’s Far Lands may have their differences, but the act of walking towards (and ultimately against) the hard limits of a virtual world is notable for both what it does to the game and what it may yet do if one were to forge onward, unflinching, into the crash.

This chapter and its case studies also served to clarify the nature of radical slowness, as embedded in literatures of willful queer failure, the glitch (or crash), and the embrace of play as a

waste of hegemonic time. I showed that, rather than being something which concretely exists in the world, a radically slow praxis is something we must continually and deliberately *strive* for:

Straznickas' mediations on and in *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* play teach us the great value in refusing the harmful imposition of hegemonic norms and suggest that radical slowness is a process that we can seek glimpses of in all facets of life, not a ready-at-hand tool that we all must master.

Doubleagent's pacifism offered us a play practice which illustrates the possibility and the potential of playing within and against a system. In this way, he challenged our sense that tarrying with the dominant is a praxis we can unthinkingly endorse. Context doubtless matters for evaluating the overall criticality of a given act, but while the Pandaren Shaman may not have had any lofty ideals behind his peaceful crusade, the act itself can still offer us one of those coveted *glimpses*.

Finally, the process of walking in *Minecraft* until the game itself cannot tolerate another step served as a reminder that we can never know at what point our striving will *end*, if indeed it ever will.²⁷⁰ Even so, the prospect of acting within a system in such a way as to move beyond a glitchy actor and instead seek the finality of the crash served as an effective model and metaphor for understanding the ultimate goal of a radically slow praxis as I see it.

Radical slowness is not trifling for trifling's sake, nor is it another in a long list of ways to remix or rejuvenate the experience of play.²⁷¹ It is not a rigorous standard by which all who care about social justice must hold themselves, nor is it a state that one can or ought to occupy indefinitely. It is an ongoing process, a working *on* and *in* the world around us in ways that threaten the status quo instead of reifying it and in a manner that interrogates not only video game

²⁷⁰ Nguyen (2021) coins the term "striving play" to refer to those who play "for the sake of the struggle" inherent in playing, a struggle which allows us to "play around with our own practical attitudes" (p. 9; p. 224). Though struggle and striving are decidedly more serious outside of the voluntary games of which Nguyen speaks, these difficult and prolonged acts bear many similarities to what I am describing here.

²⁷¹ For those who have made it this far and want a good, relevant joke as a palate cleanser, see Kaplowitz, 2022.

machines, but the larger machines of ideology that drive them. It is a messy, imprecise process and one for which we must foster solidarity and support if we are going to have a chance. Through such efforts to take one's time before their time is taken, I argue that radically slow play may allow one the time and space *and the frame of reference* to imagine, and perhaps enact, alternative modes of being which refuse a slow death from zugzwang and embrace a collective flourishing.

Conclusion

This dissertation has been an attempt on my part to speak of and against a set of systemic conditions which leave individuals too exhausted to live otherwise while also presenting a potential solution to this issue through a concept called radical slowness and an analysis of the critical, (re)generative potential of video game play. With problem and solution both well and truly accounted for, there remains little to be said before this dissertation is done. By way of wrapping up, then, I would like to take a moment to discuss (i) where there yet remains work to be done and (ii) how such labour might look, and (iii) what accomplishing our goals may yield for the individual and the world. Before doing so, however it will be worthwhile to briefly recount what this dissertation *has* done with a view to understanding what interventions might be made next.

I began by presenting a problem, an exhaustion that I have known personally and have seen manifest in the world. Inspired by a combination of chess rules and some received wisdom from critical theory that has yet to prove itself wise, that the root cause of that exhaustion was given a name – *zugzwang*. And while it is my sense that such fatigue is something felt along intersectional lines of oppression as well as in relation to supra-systemic threats like ecological collapse, I resolved to tackle this dual sense of exhaustion and powerlessness through the lens of video games as objects which are both *designed* and *played*. It was in this context that I presented the concept of *radical slowness* which represents the sort of praxis we might strive towards in attempting to tarry with the dominant in ways are (re)generative – that is to say restful in a way that makes it possible for us to imagine unravelling *zugzwang* and attending to the harms perpetuated by the status quo.

Not wanting to limit my analysis to my voice and my experiences alone, I then looked at how slowness is framed within game culture. This was done both to show some specific ways that slowness and even overtly political slow movements tend to *maintain* *zugzwang* and to introduce *comfort* as a motivator for why people seek slowness, as well as a source of political stasis, i.e. how things tend to stay the way they are. The transactional nature of play, in particular, was highlighted

as a fundamental tenant of game culture which impedes even the seemingly radical patientgamer from breaking out of the cycles which prevent our leisure time from being (re)generative, instead rendering it productive of neoliberal, capitalist logics.

This was followed up by a discussion of how a particular, dominant sense of what labour and leisure *are for* often ends up encoded into games by design. This involved grappling with the notion that all play is a form of work, which I have framed not as something to mourn, but rather as a call to attend to the work that games and play *do* in the world and begin to ask how we might change that. The notion of leisure (like labour) being a source of exhaustion was made clearer through the concept of boredom, although the term also had a second, more optimistic framing which suggested that being fed up with a system may be an ideal place to start working towards changing it. Along the way, I looked at a number of games which I suggested were “about” work in various ways as a means of showing both the different ways that games currently prop up the exhausting status quo, while also locating evocative tensions which might give us a foothold in the work to come. Even so, all of this was done in service of suggesting that the work of enacting meaningful change would be a difficult process with many obstacles.

With the landscape of zugzwang, work, and play laid bare, I then made the pivot to discussing examples of games and play practices which either tacitly or directly seek to intervene in those prevailing senses of what games and leisure time should be doing in the world. I began by looking to games which had clearly been made with some sense of exhaustion and its discontents in mind. What I found was that although a number of games do good work to subvert hegemonic norms, there are a few ways that the very nature of designing a game dampens the ability of any one piece of software to enact change. Beyond the problematic ways that design theory tends to frame things like meaning and player agency, the simple fact that designing a game is a process with an apparent *end* (in opposition to our sense of critique which is endless) was shown to be a fundamental limitation. As such, while I maintained that the act of *designing* (that is being a

designer as a project *itself*, particularly in arrangements like workers' co-ops) is of course useful in the circulation of anti-hegemonic sentiments and praxis, no individual game is enough to turn the tide.

This is why I then looked to the *play* of video games for signs of a (re)generative, radically slow praxis. By centering the ways that texts are *decoded* by players and particularly highlighting the figure of the trifler, I argued that there are ways of playing games which reveal the system for what it is while having the potential to disrupt or overwrite its underlying logics. These case studies also served as opportunities to make observations about the nature of radical slowness, to pinpoint the beginnings of a way of being which refuses debilitating cycles of zugzwang and carves out time for the individual to *rest*, alongside other anti-hegemonic work. I also touched on how radical slowness can be seen as a temporary exit from one's daily life and its arbitrary responsibilities through Goetz' description of games as a deliberate waste of time. And while radical slowness is not a 'thing' in the world that we can all just 'do,' I maintain that striving towards it and away from exhaustion is a worthwhile undertaking. Wark's notion of gamespace truly shines here since I see the power of my work not only in what it means for video games, but what implications it holds for the larger games of everyday life in which we must all take part for survival.

And there you have it! As is often the case with large-scale works like this, I feel now as if I have only just arrived at the beginning of what I wanted to say, although clearly everything in this dissertation needed to be said first or else I could never have made it this far. Let us now return to the stated purpose of this conclusion, which is in point of fact to do the exact opposite of bringing the discussion to a close.

Where there yet remains work to be done

The question of where this work might go from here will of course vary depending on one's perspective. In the first place, I believe that the domain of *energy* and *exhaustion* is one which merits further investigation. While there is, without a doubt, immense value in the situated

knowledges brought forth by authors who work along specific vectors of privilege and/or oppression, I maintain that energy and exhaustion are concepts which resonate across these lived experiences in ways that allow for meaningful connections between literatures that are often quite distinct. While such granularity serves a great number of uses, the development of a shared language for all who are oppressed strikes me as something hugely worthwhile. It is through such solidarity that we might bolster each other and call forth the energy necessary to stall the mechanisms of zugzwang altogether. As noted in the introduction, I do not make this claim out of a desire to flatten all manner of oppression into simply “being tired” but rather wish to suggest like Berlant does of the concept of slow death that understanding institutional violence in a broader sense is an effective compliment to those accounts that grow out of the specificity of lived experiences and lived frustrations.

Speaking of which, on a more practical but no less imminent note, I think that some of the bodies of work with which I engaged such as queer theory or Ahmed’s ongoing work surrounding institutions and complaint need continued support and dissemination. I say this not to advocate for good citational politics (although those are certainly important in any scholarly work) but rather out of a sense that these and other literatures from the margins are essential to understand for anyone working in academia and indeed anyone who wants to understand how they can help those around them. Neoliberal institutions, whether media conglomerates, corporations, universities, military organizations, all levels of government and their corresponding legal systems, and beyond perpetuate themselves by separating those that act within them, implicitly and explicitly pitting them against one another so that we all work ourselves to (and often past) the point of exhaustion.²⁷² The first step to cultivating solidarity under such a system is to do one’s due

²⁷² Recall the example of the debts of nations versus those of individuals. Any crime whose punishment is a monetary fine only polices the working class.

diligence to listen and to uplift voices that speak of how these spaces have been and continue to be inhospitable to so many of us, even as others have been able to get comfortable.

From a game studies standpoint, this dissertation has made meaningful contributions to work that seeks to undermine received notions about games and play. I have also articulated a way that play itself can be understood as critical that exists outside of (but still relates to) the *critical play* model. From here I believe more work could be done to fill in the fullest implications of this notion that all play is in some way critical. One could maintain the Warkian line and argue that the ways we make sense of virtual worlds have bearing on how we make sense of the world around us (or vice versa). One might equally advance the project of finding ways to play that afford a more unproductive, but no less meaningful sort of leisure, or continue to interrogate the very concept of play itself beyond its apparent criticality. Finally, while I believe Chapter 2 offered a fine start, I also think more could be done with this notion of the transactional nature of play as a way to discuss games and Empire. There are many models of monetization within the games industry, but I still feel that the player always gives something of themselves to the game in the hopes of receiving something in return.

From a design perspective, one could certainly look at more examples of games and analyze the extent to which they reify or refute neoliberal, capitalist logics. This in turn could lead to a set of best practices for anti-zugzwang game design, or at least game design that encourages leisure of a sort that more *restful* or *(re)generative* than the dominant approaches that we have critiqued here. As for the wider complaint I levied towards design theory in general, I think that more could be done here to discuss the full breadth of design theories that exist. While I was focused on proceduralism and other textbook approaches that I have personally observed to be prevalent in both pedagogical settings and academic writing, there are lessons to be learned from attempting to employ other, more user-centered models of design in a game context. Even so, I still think that design theory and the primacy of the designer is something that anyone working in the field needs

to reckon with at some level. Equally important is one's positionality as a designer when working in a community or from a position as someone within the academy. One of the lessons from my time in Informatics is that the problem of design needs to be presented to students earlier and more frequently as a matter of principle.

With reference to theories of labour and leisure, I see this dissertation as taking observations from the likes of Agamben or Lefebvre a step further by seriously interrogating the critical potential of play through specific examples that are still grounded in the broader premise that all leisure time "does work" of one sort or another. One might prod further at this notion of play 'doing work' from a number of angles. Similarly, our framework, in tandem with Sharma's work allowed us to effectively critique Slow Life movements and unpack the ambivalent politics of slowness more broadly. Despite this, I believe that more work ought to be done to find ways of slowing down while being careful to keep the question of privilege in mind. We can already see work like this being done in Rauch's *Slow Media* (2018) and Kitchin and Fraser's *Slow Computing* (2020).

There is likely more to be said here, but again, the act of concluding a document of this nature has a way of making one feel like they have only just started. As I have suggested at various points, however, a major part of living and working 'as-if' the revolution is simply 'not-yet' here is writing what I *do not know*. Keeling teaches us that the unabashed optimism contained in the vision of a world united under the banner of rest and of people reclaiming the energy to work in ways that make unacceptable the harms of the status quo is not a *limitation* of such a goal but rather *a testament to its possibility*. But here at the end of this dissertation, I suppose it is worth trying to imagine what this might look like.

"Your move."

Perhaps it is as simple as starting, as I did in this dissertation, by reflecting on the various ways that you are, and have been, exhausted. Perhaps this will give you the words to share your

experiences with others and you will be able to listen to and learn from theirs in kind. These reciprocal accounts of how we have all made do are sure to invoke despair, that all-too familiar drive to retreat and make the best of things. But I contend that such solidarity can push us past despair, past seeking shelter in comfort, and help us realize that there may be other moves we can make. Have you ever looked at a crowd of people and stopped to think about how they all have lives that must be at least as complex and delicate as yours? Everyone, to some extent, can perceive the harms wrought by the status quo but knowing this and *hearing* it are different beasts. We want change, but we are tired, so let us rest and revolt.

As more people share their exhaustion with more people, we can begin to take full stock of the transactions at play – of all that is taken and all that is given. Perhaps, at that point, we can decide which debts will be repaid and which will be forgotten. Our patience is the fulcrum on which so much of the status quo rests and our energy need not be spent on working ourselves to death or burning the planet alive. If enough of us can *see* that and enough of us can *say* that, then let us put that into practice and act in ways that are (re)generative of something different. Let us depart the chessboard and take our moves elsewhere. We need not only look to video games for examples here.

One part of what is so exhausting about the status quo is that there is so much happening in the world and not enough being said about most of it. In that spirit, and out of a desire to offset the bleak tone of the introduction, I offer some examples here which I think merit further support, and which suggest that something like a radical slowness may already be taking shape.

Among young adults in China, the 躺平 (Tang ping, literally “lying flat”) movement has manifested as an expression of frustration with the pressures of working oneself to death (Kuo, 2021; Davidovic, 2022). Meanwhile in North America many see the supposed labour shortage for what it is – a growing desire among employees to be paid a living wage (O’Connor, 2022). People continue to leave their jobs in droves as part of what is called The Great Resignation (Iacurci, 2022)

and major corporations which once claimed that they could not afford to pay employees more have suddenly begun to find ways of raising wages (Palmer, 2021). In many sectors, workers have chosen to fight back against toxic labour conditions. Rather than quitting one job and heading for another which may perpetuate the same ills, we are seeing many efforts towards unionization from shipping and logistics giants like Amazon (Selyukh, 2022) to service industry monoliths like Starbucks (Higgins, 2022), and indeed the video game industry (Carpenter, 2021; Liao, 2021).

These are encouraging developments, but of course more work remains to be done. Lying flat must be a collective effort or else it risks becoming a pastime of only those with the savings to stay afloat and labour movements are only as strong as the solidarity they build and then maintain over time. And while the reluctant raising of wages is a victory, the time and energy required for bringing this change about is far greater than the damage done to the stability of these corporations. If we stop at these small consolations, then zugzwang will persist, as well as the broader logics which keep the working class and other marginalized people at a deficit and at arm's length. We still have work to do.

How such labour might look

While I by no means claim to have absolute knowledge of anyone else's struggles in the contemporary moment, this dissertation has given me the opportunity to do some thinking around anti-zugzwang praxis, which I would now like to share. Like the rest of this dissertation, my ideas begin in the context of video games, but I hope the parallels to everyday life will become clear in due course.

In a piece I wrote shortly before beginning this dissertation, I discussed the critical potential of play through the use of two concepts which I called *perception* and *visibility*. The former term served as "a measure of an actor's awareness and understanding of the methods through which a system understands their actions," while the latter referred to "the degree to which a larger system can account for the actions of those acting within it" (Scully-Blaker, 2020a, p. 42).

Perception might refer to an accountant's familiarity with tax law and its loopholes just as much as it might relate to how well a player has come to understand the mechanics of game or even its code. Visibility, on the other hand, refers to such systems of rules themselves and what they are capable of interpreting – one example from Chapter 4 was our discussion of *Walden* and the oxymoron of the intentional glitch. My choice of the actor-system dialectic was deliberate, a broader stand-in for player-game. In a manner that would later inspire Chapters 3 through 5, I then went through a few case studies to discern different 'gradients' of perception and visibility in order offer as full a sense of this relation as possible.

I bring these terms to the fore now because I see that relation between *seeking to understand (i.e. perceive) a system* while doing as much as possible *to avoid being understood (i.e. visible) by it* as an effective description of the sort of critical work that I advocate for in this dissertation.

Unlike design or other specialized practices, play is something which we all necessarily do, so I argued that our efforts are best spent on becoming 'better' players.²⁷³ Doing so involves developing a deep understanding of the games that we navigate which, in turn, enables us to act in ways that these larger systems cannot comprehend. As such, in the article I advocated for striving for more than a surface-level perception of these systems and towards a middling or even total perception instead. In a video game, this might look like the practice of glitch hunting, or even tinkering with game and/or its code to the point that one has a better sense of the rules than those who made it in the first place.²⁷⁴ At the same time, I also argued that one should seek to act in ways that are either partially visible or invisible altogether. Though I did not realize it then, this behavior certainly recalls the figure of the trifler, whose goals are not apparent until it is too late, as well as the figure of the glitch or, in the case of total invisibility, the total procedural severing of the crash.

²⁷³ Of course, meant in the sense used by de Koven and not an evocation of the gamerbro mantra to "get good".

²⁷⁴ See Scully-Blaker (2014; 2018) for a more pointed discussion of this as it pertains to speedruns.

Through these concepts as well as Crawford's (1982) claim that "Games provide safe ways to experience reality," I concluded that these virtual worlds are "precisely the sort of spaces in which we may articulate critical resistances to the various oppressive forces in our lives that cannot be assailed directly without taking great risks" (p. 15; Scully-Blaker, 2020a, p. 55) I contended then as I do now that a "collective deepening of player perception, is necessary for the maintenance of all lives and not just some over others" and to this we might add an embrace of partial or total invisibility from those logics which seek to capture us in a cycle of toil and fatigue, a concerted refusal to be counted (p. 56). And while it proved more difficult than expected to find a space for these concepts in my analysis up to now, I introduce this dual movement of deepening perception and coveting invisibility here as an effective template for anti-zugzwang praxis.

Indeed, if we recall the parallels between games as systems and the larger systems of everyday life, the implications that perception and visibility hold for a grander scheme of things come into focus. Developing a richer understanding of how larger systems operate is useful – one must know the rules in order to break them. And striving to operate in ways that are at most partially visible is of course an effective way to avoid one's tactics being detected, and ultimately co-opted, by the dominant for as long as possible.²⁷⁵ Whatever shape one's actions take and whatever contexts one is capable of operating within, this framework of perception and visibility is, I believe, a useful tool for shaping any work that operates against the oppressive status quo.

In this dissertation, I settled on radically slow play as one form of (re)generative resistance and argued that it represents a trifling with the dominant and a process of becoming ungovernable by the neoliberal, capitalist logics which force us into zugzwang. And while I believe that I have presented a number of strong arguments for the importance of slowness as one front in the struggle for rest and against exhaustion, I can imagine one finding tactics that promote perception and

²⁷⁵ See Fiske (2003) – while his metaphor of the "real" ripped jeans is well and good, there is a lot at risk in being caught trying to upend the system.

thwart visibility in other contexts. Future work in this area would do well to recall that nothing is inherently emancipatory, nor is it inherently hegemonic. One must fully account for the ambivalent politics of their milieu of choice before moving forward. The process of critique (which we previously defined as ‘making reality unacceptable’) is long and difficult, so it is vital that one only embark on this road fully prepared for all risks and benefits that may be headed their way. And I mean that as I write it – we have a lot to lose, but we also have a lot to gain.

What accomplishing our goals may yield for the individual and the world

In the most specific sense, my hope in writing this dissertation has been to offer a template for the analysis and even the construction of radically slow play practices so that one might translate these into practices of everyday life which can combat zugzwang. Speaking more broadly, we might say that I have endeavoured to produce a document which may encourage and assist others in finding new ways to play against hegemony even as we all must play within it, as well as one which provides an adequate backdrop for justifying why such practices are necessary and valuable. Even so, I acknowledge that there is a tendency in theoretical work (and indeed much of my own writing!) to alienate readers by coming across as too abstract. And while the latter half of this dissertation has endeavoured to concretize *some* sense of what radical slowness and broader anti-zugzwang praxis might look like, I would like to end things off by re-visiting why I think such work matters beyond it satisfying a major degree requirement for its author.

In speaking of playing well, de Koven writes that it is “the result of an ongoing process of negotiation and renegotiation” (2013, p. 41). For him, the rules that dictate how a given game functions “are made for the convenience of those who are playing,” for the benefit of the whole rather than specific individuals within it (p. 44). And so, it follows that if “the game, as we are playing it is no longer appropriate” then “change is necessary” (p. 45). Such change can be minute – a tweak to one rule to make things run more smoothly – but in some cases, “what we need to be doing is something else all together” (p. 58). As de Koven notes, however, “there is no ‘the game’ for

a play community. Any game whatever, as long as we are playing it well, is the game.” (p. 45).²⁷⁶ The people playing games are more important than the integrity of the games themselves.

Key here is de Koven’s sense of what playing well *is*. For indeed, one might be tempted to read in this the same sort of white, patriarchal gamer logic which encourages one to “get good” – to acclimate to the system as it is rather than trying to change things. For de Koven, however, “The word ‘well’ embraces the qualities of what we consider to be a state of excellence and health” (p. xxiv). Unlike the current work culture of grinding until one turns to dust, playing well here does not run in opposition to one’s well-being. The two are in fact bound up in one another, as are all of the other players and their respective abilities to find nourishment from the practices of everyday life. Of course, achieving such a lofty goal is by no means easy.

Any change will necessarily begin on a smaller scale. “If we can create a well-played game, just one, we will be able to acknowledge, without embarrassment or question, our own and each other’s genuine claim to excellence” (p. 143). We might look to communal models of care and mutual aid here as promising examples. See also the sort of happenings which get truncated into pithy memes about one’s faith in humanity being restored. But, if we truly wish to rewrite the biggest and most damaging games of all, if we wish to build solidarity through a shared desire of making reality unacceptable, then we must go further.

For those that find comfort in the games that we all play presently, the prospect of change is doubtless scary. Further, those who stand to benefit the most from the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism are also in the best position to keep things as they are, an impulse whose limits have yet to be found even as people continue to suffer and the world continues to literally and figuratively burn.²⁷⁷ We must refuse this system which consistently pits us against one another, that leaves only

²⁷⁶ Though this may lead one to suggest that capitalism’s persistence is a well-played game, I would counter that this particular game’s perpetuity is assured by holding a number of the players hostage.

²⁷⁷ I am reminded here of the phrase “I don’t know how to explain to you why you should care about other people,” which first emerged in response to debates around the Affordable Care Act has since been circulated

some comfortable while others struggle to exist, and that incentivizes an alienating individualism whose only possibilities for collectivity are found in productive outlets like fandoms and patriotic jingoism. It is only through failing to submit to these norms and agreeing that our game needs to change that we have the potential to embrace a model of playing well which would see a collective flourishing.²⁷⁸

What radical slowness offers is a framework for those who are oppressed to work at taking their time and limiting the extent to which their time is taken – it is a way of consolidating one’s energy so that one can play ‘well.’

With time, I am hopeful that this attitude and the energy it provides might enable us to effectively dismantle the individualistic mirage propped up by neoliberalism and instead start taking care of one another and as de Koven puts it, “raise the stakes infinitely” until we find ourselves approaching the sort of utopic arrangements that are presently the most stratospheric flights of fancy (p. 143). Here I also think of Suits (2014) who similarly spends much of *The Grasshopper* discussing examples of the sorts of games one might play for fun or for sport but who, like de Koven, pivots to discussing larger games by the end of the work. For Suits, “game playing is what makes Utopia intelligible” (p. 188). It is only by peeling away the instrumentality of everyday acts and turning them into playful activities that he argues such happiness might be attainable. And while the very nature of utopia (a term which literally means “no place”) is perhaps a deliberately elusive or even impossible thought experiment, this is my hope, a by-product of my living and working ‘as-if’ the revolution may yet occur.

and misattributed to many people and serves as an indicator of the prevalence of self-preservation instead of care for a wider collective (Spencer, 2020).

²⁷⁸ Again from de Koven: If we can create even larger games that we can all play well together—all of us—then there will be no separation between us and others, no we and they. We will all be one community. All one species.” (p. 143)

Coda

Whether radical slowness is ultimately the best approach to changing institutional games into something more generative of social justice and collective flourishing is unknown to me at this time. What I am clear on, however, and what cannot ever be repeated too much, is what is at stake in changing these games – who stands to win or lose whether we take action or go with the flow. We cannot lean on the received wisdom that capitalism will one day destroy itself without ignoring the (increasingly imminent) possibility that it will destroy many of us first. As something must be done and while I am by no means in a position to dictate what that should be, I believe that reclaiming the energy lost to zugzwang is vital if we are to have any chance at all.

If Agamben is right and all play must be work, then let us work on and at play in ways that benefit everyone and not just those who can afford the privilege to thrive. To find that game which lets us all play well requires both imagining how that game might look *and* how we might do without the one we play presently. Neither of these is an easy task, but both are more attainable if we can redirect the energy that we spend on keeping our heads above water towards building something that keeps us all afloat. It is as Jayanth suggests - we must embark on a “project of imagining pleasures and satisfactions outside of the ones on offer” and in so doing “make that revolution irresistible – even if that revolution makes us redundant” (2021, para. 95). The highest aspiration for any work on revolution is arguably that what it revolts against may one day cease to matter, and in many ways I can think of no better fate for this dissertation.

It is very often the case that any academic writing of this scale is at least partly redundant once it has navigated all of the editorial eyes that must be laid upon it. Indeed, in the time that it took to start and finish writing this, the world has seen wars, regime changes, disasters, a global pandemic, not to mention the release of specific games or the publication of new scholarship, some of which veered aspects of my work in new directions and others which I wish could have been meaningfully addressed. There are many spaces where I mourn being unable to have said more,

worry I should have said less, and just generally wonder whether I am equal to the task of conveying my thoughts and feelings to text in a way that resonates and indicates to others that these were thoughts and feelings worth conveying. I'm sure I will be haunted by l'esprit de l'escalier before long.

Here at the very end, though, such redundancies do not seem to matter to me as much as they have and may yet again. I think that this change of heart comes back to my understanding of critique as both an object (a text) and a process. Here at the very end, while all is said and done within the present inquiry, my life and the lives of those who read this document will persist for a (hopefully long!) time after the ink has dried, and so too will the vitality of the larger critical project which these words seek to fuel. Critique, the refusal to accept what is given and strive instead for what could be, is a process which cannot, and never will, reach an end point. Here at the very end, I can only continue to work 'as-if' these ideas have use until one day they reach redundancy for reasons which I hope correspond with Jayanth's sense of the term. The work of trifling is never done! It is only this dissertation, like any other designed work, that must necessarily arrive at a conclusion.

And so it has.

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